The Taste of Power: Military Factionalism and the Consolidation of Power in 1960s Guatemala

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Introduction

The 1966 transition of the Guatemalan presidency from the right-wing military regime under Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia (1963-1966) to the center-left civilian Julio César Méndez Montenegro (1966-1970) signaled a reduction of military power within the electoral process and the potential for reform. Méndez’s victory in a free and fair election was a result of division amongst the armed forces and conservatives that split them into two political parities, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) and the Partido Institucional Democrático (PID). With the support of the United States to curb electoral fraud and discourage coup attempts from the right, Méndez became the second Guatemalan president in history to complete a full term in office. The United States and Guatemalan leftists hoped that the new administration would reduce military influence in the country and adopt much needed social and economic reforms in accordance with the U.S. Alliance for Progress.

Ironically, it was under Méndez’s U.S.-backed administration that Guatemala witnessed the expansion and consolidation of the armed forces, increased repression against all opposition, and virtually no reform. How did the Guatemalan military subvert the U.S. supported civilian government and the objectives of the Alliance for Progress

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1 I wish to express my gratitude to my family, Alicia Estrada, Virginia Garrard Burnett and Arturo Arias for their support and belief in me. I also thank Jonathan Brown, Michael Powelson, Emily Spangenberg and Pamela Neumann for their helpful comments. All errors remaining are, of course, mine.

2 Jim Handy, Gift of the Devil, (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1984), 158-161.
and unite to become the dominant force within government by the 1970s? This paper argues that the Guatemalan military was able to undermine civilian rule and consolidate power within the political system by utilizing the presence of a guerrilla movement to justify a counter-insurgency campaign that allowed them to repress oppositional forces through violence and terror in order to limit political participation and prevent future losses of power.

The 1960s marked a turning point in Guatemalan history which saw the institutionalization of the military as an active participant in the political process and the adoption of counter-insurgency tactics to combat the guerrillas.\(^3\) By the time Méndez took office, the military was ideologically united under the banner of anti-communism following the 1954 CIA-backed coup that overthrew leftist President Jacobo Arbenz (1950-1954) and ended a ten-year revolutionary government. Yet, the armed forces remained characterized by fractionalization that stemmed from the 1954 coup as well as institutional and personalistic indifference that plagued the institution since its establishment in 1871. During the 1966 elections, tensions erupted between segments of the moderate branch of the military (led by the PID) who agreed to allow Méndez to ascend to power and the radical right (under the guidance of the MLN) who constantly plotted coups against both Peralta and Méndez. This atmosphere was exacerbated by the guerrillas, who increasingly assassinated, kidnapped and ransomed prominent Guatemalans, thus leading to an increase in elite support for the MLN’s desire to overthrow the government. The Guatemalan military and U.S. agents feared that if these conditions continued, civil war and the disintegration of the armed forces were inevitable. In addition, the right and military were shaken by Mendez’s victory, since many viewed

\(^3\) The guerilla movement will be examined below.
him as a communist due to his reformist agenda. Thus, the armed forces needed to resolve their differences in order to avoid civil war and the disintegration of their institution as well as to prevent future “leftists” such as Méndez from coming to power.

Within the context of the Cold War, U.S. pressure to conduct internal security under the Alliance for Progress and the constant threat of a coup based on the guerrilla problem against Méndez, forced the Guatemalan government to intensify its efforts against the guerrillas. Counter-insurgency provided a channel for the armed forces to put aside their differences and unite beneath the common objective of eliminating the guerrilla threat. Consequently, the presence of the guerrillas allowed the military to justify their autonomy from civilian rule, adopt repressive counter-insurgency strategies that included the creation of death squads, and resist progressive reforms promoted by the Alliance for Progress and Mendez’s Revolutionary Party (PR). By the end of the 1960s, the armed forces formed a MLN/PID alliance to regain the presidency in 1970 against a weakened PR and would not relinquish formal power to a civilian president until 1985.

This research paper argues that military fractionalization in the 1960s was overcome in their fight against the guerillas, which led to their consolidation of power in the political system during the Méndez administration through a violent counter-insurgency campaign. In order to understand the root causes of fragmentation within the armed forces, institutional deficiencies and internal division during the 1960s will be analyzed. Second, the role of the United States in promoting both internal security and the Alliance for Progress will be examined to understand its impact in equipping and expanding the capabilities of the military to carry out counter-insurgency operations.

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Third, the adoption of counter-insurgency strategies and the defeat of the left will be assessed to analyze the success of the armed forces in utilizing political violence and fear to consolidate their power in the political arena.

Research on the Guatemalan military in the 1960s has focused on the repressive measures of the military, such as the persecution of leftists, its counter-insurgency strategies, and the expansion of the security system through U.S. financial and technical assistance. Unfortunately, many of these studies have failed to examine the internal divisions between the armed forces and conservatives. Although some scholars note the existence of fractionalization in the military, most studies were conducted before the end of the civil war in 1996 and lack up-to-date sources such as de-classified documents from U.S. agencies that have recorded the development of the armed forces in Guatemala.

This research paper seeks to contribute towards this literature through the use of recently declassified documents from various U.S. agencies such as the CIA, State Department, Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These documents provide an in depth perspective on internal military relations and the role of the United States in expanding the armed forces. Moreover, secondary sources and periodicals are used to provide further insight on the political situation in the 1960s.

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Military Division in the 1960s

On March 30, 1963, Minister of Defense Peralta overthrew President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes, marking the emergence of the first genuine military state. Although previous military men such as General Justo Rufino Barrios (1873–1885) and General Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) ruled Guatemala by utilizing the armed forces to secure and maintain power, these regimes did not constitute military governments. Instead, officers were discouraged by these rulers from engaging in politics in order to prevent a challenge to their authority. Despite these efforts, the military was the traditional arbitrator of political power and removed rulers that lost support of the elites and middle-class. These conditions were the justification for the military to overthrow Ubico in 1944 following a series of protests and civil unrest from the urban middle class, students and teachers against the dictatorship. Peralta’s installment of the military state in 1963 ushered in an era wherein the military transitioned from political broker and protector of the elites to the permanent wielder of power and ruler of the state. However, fractionalization and the lack of professionalization in the military influenced many military officers to become increasingly active in politics and compete for administrative and political positions, thus intensifying internal competition and threatening the stability of the armed forces in the 1960s.

Since the establishment of the Guatemalan military in 1871, institutional deficiencies hampered professionalization, specifically low pay which fostered factions to manifest. In the early 1960’s, a second lieutenant in Guatemala was paid $75 a month and received a pay increase of $25 with every promotion which on average occurred

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7 Adams, 91.
8 McClintock, 69.
every three years. Members of the army complained that their salaries were insufficient to support themselves and their families.\(^9\) As a result, officers usually adopted one of two alternatives to supplement their income which included acquiring scarce military posts within government that provided an additional stipend or engaging in almost any kind of private enterprise, both requiring many to get involved in politics to succeed.\(^10\) In 1970, Richard N. Adams noted the dilemma these circumstances caused and claimed:

> Both avenues [often used together rather than separately] may lead to conflicts with professionalism. The individual seeking politically powerful positions must inevitably compromise his professional attitudes; and the individual engaging in private enterprise obviously will have demands on his time and privileges that conflict with military responsibilities.\(^11\)

Furthermore, low pay stimulated corruption that served against the interests of the armed forces. Most notably, officers often illicitly sold arms to the guerrillas in the early 1960s for extra income.\(^12\) Adams states that “the major rewards of power and income” and the limited amount of promotions gave way to “a significant amount of internal competition” and factionalism based on various characteristics such as ideology, age, ethnicity and military branch.\(^13\) Moreover, factions stimulated further division between officers which often became the basis for rebellions, particularly when promotions were exclusively distributed to certain factions. For example, an army uprising on November 13, 1960 was due in part to Ydigoras’s bias in promoting older officers and allies from the Ubico era which irritated younger officers.\(^14\) Thus, institutional deficiencies such as poor pay

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9 Adams, 92.
10 Ibid. Officers were prohibited from running liquor factories or cabarets.
11 Ibid.
12 Galeano, 33.
13 Adams, 95. Adams provides a further discussion on traditional factions within the military.
14 Handy, 153.
fostered individual ambition for personal gain, hampering professionalization and
damaging internal cohesion within the armed forces evident in the 1960s.

In preparing to return Guatemala to constitutional government, Peralta sought to
institutionalize the military in the political system and eliminate all leftist elements
through undemocratic means. Upon taking power, Peralta shut down Congress, nullified
the Constitution and repressed all opposition. But unlike his predecessors, Peralta did not
plan “to become a dictator” or stay in power for long.\(^{15}\) Instead, he intended to
consolidate the power of the military in the electoral process by creating the PID to lead a
coalition of political parties with the goal of establishing a one-party system modeled
after the Mexican government.\(^{16}\) To achieve these goals, Peralta limited political
participation by requiring new political parties to submit lists of 50,000 members to be
approved by the government, thereby preventing leftist and opposition groups from
gaining legality and registering for elections. As a result, the only political parties
allowed to participate in the 1964 elections for the Constituent Assembly, which was to
draft a new constitution, were the Revolutionary Party (PR) and the MLN.\(^{17}\) The latter
was an extreme-rightist party founded by ardent anti-communists under the leadership of
Mario Sandoval Alarcón and included many rightist officers and former supporters of
Col. Carlos Castillo Armas who led the 1954 coup.\(^{18}\) The PID-MLN-PR coalition began
negotiations in 1965 to nominate an official presidential candidate for the March 1966

\(^{15}\) John O. Bell to Department of State, 3 Apr 1963, National Security Archives, Death Squads,
Guerrilla War, Covert Operations, and Genocide: Guatemala and the United States, 1954-1999 [hereafter
 cited as NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999], #00131.
\(^{16}\) Handy, 158.
\(^{17}\) “Guatemala Elections Will Be in Effect a Plebiscite,” 7 May 1964, National Security Files,
Country File, NSF, box 54, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas [hereafter Country File, NSF, Box
54, LBJ Library]; Handy, 158. The left-of-center Christian Democrats collected more than 50,000
signatures, but were not allowed to participate in the 1966 elections by Peralta.
\(^{18}\) Shirley, 273. Among its most influential members were the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces,
Miguel Angel Ponciano Samayoa, Col. Adolfo Callejas, Kjell Laugerud Garcia and Col. Rafael Arriaga.
elections, but disagreement due to internal competition among military factions led to its breakdown. According to the U.S. State Department, the source of division was the result of “personal ambitions of several high ranking officers and opposition by various sectors of the armed forces to all of the potential candidates” both military and civil.\textsuperscript{19} The MLN opposed the PID’s choice of Col. Juan de Dios Aguilar, leading to their nomination of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Miguel Angel Ponciano Samayoa who was reportedly disliked and overlooked as the official nominee by Peralta for “personal and professional reasons.”\textsuperscript{20} Likewise, the PR nominated Julio Méndez who was the respected dean of the law school at the University of San Carlos.\textsuperscript{21} Although, Peralta limited political participation in order to establish military and conservative supremacy over the electoral process, he failed to secure a coalition to institutionalize the military as the dominant force in the political system. Instead, the military and the right were split between the PID and the MLN, leaving the PR to represent the only civilian opposition to the right and military state.

Throughout Peralta’s administration opposition from MLN members of the military was prevalent and increased during the 1966 presidential elections. Rightist members of the military were particularly upset at Peralta for his decision to return to constitutionality. For example, in 1964, ninety officers (many who were former associates of Castillo Armas), the Mariscal Zavala Brigade based in Guatemala City and the air force planned to overthrow Peralta before the 1964 elections for the Constituent

\textsuperscript{19} “The Situation in Guatemala,” 12, Jan 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Handy, 159; Guatemalan Dead on Campaign Eve,” 1 Nov 1965, New York Times, 16. The PR originally elected party leader Mario Méndez Montenegro as their presidential candidate. But, shortly before the official start of campaigning, Mario Méndez suspiciously died by committing suicide by shooting himself in the heart. Left without a candidate the PR nominated his brother Julio. The PR hoped that Julio’s prestige as dean of the law school and the public emotion with the death of his brother would aid him in the elections.
Assembly. Peralta was able to survive these challenges through the support of the elites, the U.S. and loyalty of the majority of the armed forces. His base weakened in 1965 with an upsurge of guerrilla activity which included the kidnapping and ransoming of prominent Guatemalan citizens. By the end of 1966, $2 million in ransom had been paid to the guerrillas from rich Guatemalan City families. Many of the kidnapped refused to cooperate with the police since they perceived the government to be incapable of protecting them from the subversives. These conditions created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity which delegitimized Peralta’s government. As a result, the upper-class, business community and rightist officers began to increasingly support the MLN and Ponciano who campaigned on anti-communism, security and order. Moreover, the MLN believed they had a slim chance to win the elections and utilized the insurgent threat to begin to justify a coup against Peralta to gain power. Consequently, the guerrilla threat and the MLN’s belief that Ponciano would lose the elections burgeoned plots to overthrow Peralta.

The military’s split between the PID and the MLN and the potential for conflict by late-1965 led the U.S. to intervene to prevent violence within the armed forces. The PID was centered on Peralta who was backed by the moderates and those loyal to him in the military. In contrast, Ponciano received allegiance by influential members of the

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22 “Plans of Political Leaders and Military Officers for a Coup Before 24 May 1964,” 3 April, 1963, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00173; “Continuing Plots for a Coup to Depose the Chief of the Guatemalan Government,” 16 May 1964, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, # 00175. One of the officers involved was Col. Jose Cruz Salazar who was the head of Castillo Armas political party, the Nationalist Democratic Movement which was the MLN’s predecessor.
25 The Situation in Guatemala,” 10 Dec 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library; AmEmbassy, Guatemala to Secretary of State, 24 Nov 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library; AmEmbassy to Secretary of State, 6 Dec 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library.
26 Ibid. The MLN also held that Peralta was seeking to hold fraudulent elections to favor the PID.
armed forces such as the Commander of the Guatemalan Military Zone and the Commander of the Guardia de Honor. These developments alarmed the U.S. which intervened to avert a rebellion set for late-December, 1965. By then, the U.S. Embassy was still incapable of determining the true extent of Ponciano’s military backing and expressed fear over the potential destruction he posed by noting:

[The] extent of Ponciano support from army elements is still unclear…In any case, army is currently divided in its loyalties, which means an attempted coup at this time would…not be bloodless or quickly decisive and in our opinion could therefore result in a chaotic situation.

In response, the United States intervened and directly warned Ponciano and the MLN that it would not support or recognize a government resulting from a coup and urged the adherence to scheduled elections. Subsequently, anti-government plotting stopped for the time being and free and fair elections were held. Thus, U.S. intervention was crucial in sustaining Guatemalan political stability in an atmosphere of growing polarization within the armed forces. Unfortunately, anxiety among military officers heightened after they allowed power to slip to Méndez who many viewed as a communist sympathizer.

Méndez’s victory again split the military between the moderates (PID) and the extreme-right (MLN) who feared that the new president would be “soft on communism” and deter military influence within government. Only through Peralta’s commitment to

27 Shirley, 273. The Commander of the Guatemalan Military Zone was Col. Rafael Arriaga.
28 AmEmbassy to Secretary of State, 5 Dec 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library.
29 Vaky to Secretary of State, 14 Dec 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library. Vaky reports meeting with the MLN leader Sandoval, Ponciano and Ponciano’s running mate, Chacon Pazos, in order to dissuade them from engaging in a coup attempt. Vaky claims that MLN leaders were “clearly highly bitter against chief government” and “blame inadequate [government] response to security situation on Peralta” as well as expressing other complaints.
transfer power with the backing of the U.S. was Méndez able to ascend to the presidency. Before Méndez took office, Peralta required him to submit to a secret pact guaranteeing military autonomy and appoint Col. Rafael Arriaga as Minster of Defense. Once in office, Méndez’s main objective was to survive his full term leading him to abandon his campaign promises to adopt much needed social and economic reforms. Instead, one of the president’s first acts was to visit military bases throughout Guatemala and appeal for their support. Although Peralta was able to transfer power to a constitutionally elected civilian and secure military sovereignty from government, he was unable to end military division and the MLN’s quest for power.

As in the 1966 elections, an upsurge in guerrilla activity provided the MLN with the justification for a coup. Right-wing concern about Méndez’s tolerance for communism became exacerbated after the president offered amnesty to the guerrillas (who rejected it) and appointed “communist” Miguel Angel Asturias as Ambassador to France. A secret CIA Special Memorandum in September 1966, entitled “The Danger of a Military Coup in Guatemala,” warned of a possible coup due to Méndez’s failure to make substantial gains in his first three months in office against the guerrillas. The CIA cautioned:

we think that many of the Guatemalan military leaders are approaching the point of no return with the Méndez administration. Plotting between them and civilian rightists seems to be reaching an advanced stage. Unless Méndez takes steps to reassure these elements…they are likely to move soon to displace him.

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31 REMHI, Guatemala: Never Again! (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 197-198. Méndez was forced to select a Minister of Defense from a list of three officers that included Arriaga.
33 “Guatemala – A Current Appraisal,” 8 Oct 1966, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library. Asturias was charged as a communist by some military officers and was forced into exile after Castillo Armas overthrew the Arbenz regime. He later returned when Mendez became president.
In early-October the CIA cautioned that “any significant increase in guerrilla terrorism [would] unite the military into action against Méndez” and “lead to bloodshed and perhaps civil war.” By October, the MLN had recruited and armed four-hundred mercenaries on the Honduran border ready to invade Guatemala under the leadership of an ex-U.S. Army soldier. Furthermore, the MLN secured the allegiance of an army brigade in Quetzaltenango and the Air Force Security Guard as well as offering “substantial sums of money” to any officers willing to join their movement. As a result, following a guerrilla attack on November 2, 1966 at a generating plant, Méndez declared a state of siege and immediately rounded up and arrested MLN leaders. On November 12, three Army officers, including the Vice-Minister of Defense, were arrested and exiled for their involvement in anti-government plotting. Despite these efforts, Sandoval, the MLN and the extreme-rightist officers continued to conspire. Therefore, the only method of preventing further coup-plotting, and more importantly, to sustain military unity, the armed forces under the leadership of the new Minister of Defense needed to confront the guerrilla problem and engage an effective counter-insurgency campaign.

**United States and the Guatemalan Military**

The intensification of the Cold War during the 1960s prompted the United States to design and enact the Alliance for Progress to prevent revolutionary movements in

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid. LBJ Library. The ex-U.S. Army soldier was MLN supporter Carlos Jose Thompson Cattanio, who served from 1943-46. He was also arrested in 1961 for plotting against Ydigoras.
39 “Guatemala: Army Coup Plotters to be Exiled,” 16 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00315. The three officers were reportedly heading for exile in Paraguay.
Latin America. Previously, the United States promoted hemispheric security to confront the Soviet threat in Latin America, but altered its foreign policy to concentrate on internal security to combat communism following the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The Alliance for Progress promoted economic and social reforms to reduce poverty and other factors contributing to social unrest as well as military assistance to eliminate insurgents.\(^{40}\) In Guatemala, these measures enhanced the capabilities of the military to secure power in government but failed to improve the living standards of its citizenry.

The United States in the 1960s suffered from nationalistic resentment among high-ranking members of the Guatemalan military due to involvement in the 1954 coup.\(^{41}\) Many officers, such as Peralta, were resentful of American assistance to Col. Castillo Armas in his invasion of Guatemala to overthrow Arbenz.\(^{42}\) These sentiments were exacerbated when Ydigoras allowed the CIA to train Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion in Guatemalan territory without seeking the consent of the armed forces which contributed to the November 1960 revolt.\(^{43}\) As a result, the U.S. was unable to fully influence the army under Ydigoras and Peralta. Most notably, the Guatemalan army refused training from the Green Berets until Méndez became president.\(^{44}\) Despite these circumstances, the armed forces accepted the guidelines of the Alliance for Progress in

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\(^{40}\) La Faber, 147-96. La Feber further analyzes the impact of the Alliance for Progress in Central America.


\(^{43}\) La Feber, 166-67. Over one-third of the army participated in the revolt against Ydigoras.

\(^{44}\) Jonas, 70.
order to qualify for U.S. financial assistance. Although some officers remained bitter against the United States, many were willing to accept their aid to develop the military.

The presence of the guerrillas in Guatemala created an atmosphere of concern in Washington. The roots of the revolutionary movement lay in the failed 1960 rebellion by disgruntled officers who fled into exile to regroup. Among these leaders were Lieutenants Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and Luis Augusto Turcios Lima, who received U.S. training in counter-insurgency and joined other officers from the rebellion to create the Revolutionary Movement of November 13th (MR-13). The MR-13 later collaborated with the Guatemalan Labor Party to form the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in 1962. The guerrillas never numbered more than three-hundred members at one time and operated in the eastern countryside among peasants in the departments of Zacapa and Izabal. The U.S. Embassy in Guatemala maintained good intelligence on the guerrillas in Guatemala and never perceived them as a serious threat in overthrowing the government. But, Washington overestimated the guerrilla problem and lacked a true understanding of the local situation in Guatemala. These differences were captured in 1965 when reports concerning FAR plans to attack American citizens and personnel in Guatemala were received with distress at the State Department, prompting officials there to advise the Embassy to take swift action in protecting U.S. civilians. In response to these requests, then Ambassador John O. Bell complained to the Assistant Secretary of State:

I must express my dismay and irritation at Dept’s reaction every time raw report is received suggesting terrorist action. Dept appears either [to] have little

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45 The internal division, ideology, political development and operations of the revolutionary guerrilla movement are beyond the scope of this paper. For details on these topics see Galeano; Jonas; Turcios Lima: *Biografía y Documentos*, (La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1969).
46 Galeano, 30-31. Yon Sosa and Turcios were trained at Fort Gulick, Panama Canal Zone and Fort Benning, Georgia, respectively.
confidence in my judgment or…are writing for record should something eventually happen. If first is true, Department should replace me now. If second case, this [is] not helpful and I suggest desist. 48

Less than two weeks later, the State Department announced the appointment of John G. Mein to replace Bell as the new Ambassador, demonstrating Washington’s seriousness about the security situation in Guatemala. 49 Despite U.S. concern, the Guatemalan army and government before 1966 viewed the guerrillas more as a nuisance than a legitimate threat. 50 Instead, much of the collaboration between the U.S. and the military in the early 1960s focused on civic action programs and the improvement of the armed forces counter-insurgency capabilities.

The John F. Kennedy administration initiated civic action programs in Latin America to enhance security and development to achieve the goals of the Alliance for Progress. The United States designed Guatemala’s civic action program in 1961 with the objective “to attack the sources of popular discontent which [gave] rise to social and political instability and to help” improve civilian-military relations in the countryside, particularly in the guerrilla strongholds of Zacapa and Izabal. 51 Between 1963 and 1966, the U.S. contributed over $2.4 million to civic action programs such as well-drilling, hot-lunch programs, a literacy campaign and health care. 52 One of the most common themes in the army’s periodical, *El Ejercito*, was the growth and activities of the civic action

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48 John O. Bell to Jack Hood Vaughn,. 1 Jul 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library. For reports on guerrillas plans to attack U.S. citizens in Guatemala and State Department response, see: “Establishment of Guerrilla Headquarters in Guatemala City; Plans for the Assassination of Guatemalan Officials and for Actions against U.S. Citizens,” 29 Jun 1965 Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library; Dept of State to AmEmbassy, 1 Jul 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library.

49 Shirley, 168.

50 AmEmbassy to Secretary of State, 17 Dec 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 54, LBJ Library. Ambassador Mein states that Peralta refused to call Yon Sosa and Turcios guerrillas.

51 “U.S. Internal Security Programs in Latin America: Guatemala,” 30 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00318. The Civic Action Program was supported by both the USAID and the MAP.

52 Ibid. The monetary total consisted of both MAP and USAID funding.
programs, especially in Zacapa and Izabal.\textsuperscript{53} But by the end of the Alliance for Progress, civic action was deemed a failure in improving the living standards of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{54} Instead, the military’s constant contact with the peasantry through these civic action programs became a key vehicle for intelligence gathering. Thus, the true beneficiaries of the civic action programs were the armed forces who were able to increase their surveillance and presence in the countryside which would prove crucial in the counter-insurgency campaign launched under Méndez in 1966.

The Alliance for Progress stressed the necessity for the increase of internal security through the professionalization and expansion of the security system in order to adequately combat insurgents within Guatemala. Under Ydigoras and Peralta, the U.S. funded the armed forces through the Military Assistance Program (MAP) to strengthen existing core units and equip the regular army to specialize in counter-insurgency. U.S. aid to Guatemala through MAP grew from $1,796,000 for 1956 thru 1961 to $10,719,249 for 1962 thru 1967.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, total military assistance to Guatemala averaged less than 200,000 from 1956 to 1960, but increased to 1.8 million from 1961 to 1968.\textsuperscript{56} In 1962, MAP began to support four army battalions in which three of the four were fully or almost fully equipped by the time Méndez took office.\textsuperscript{57} In 1966 the Department of State reported that the two battalions based in Guatemala City, the Mariscal Zavala Infantry Battalion and the Guardia de Honor, were 97 and 98 percent at “planned capability”

\textsuperscript{53} Shirley, 154-156.
\textsuperscript{54} La Faber, 169; Galeano, 79.
\textsuperscript{56} Shirley, 204-205. This includes other sources such as Excess Stocks and International Military Education and Training assistance.
\textsuperscript{57} “U.S. Internal Security Programs in Latin America: Guatemala,” 30 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00318. MAP supported four T-33’s, four C47’s, three forty-foot Coast Guard utility boats each armed with 50 caliber MGs as well as providing, trucks, arms, ammunition and radios and training.
respectively, while a battalion in Zacapa was at 100 percent.\footnote{Ibid.} Other units essential to counter-insurgency were established, equipped and sustained by MAP and ready for action by mid-1966.\footnote{“U.S. Internal Security Programs in Latin America: Guatemala,” 30 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00318; McClintock, 57. These counter-insurgency units included the 1\textsuperscript{st} Airborne Infantry and the 1\textsuperscript{st} Special Forces Company which consisted of elite troops modeled after the U.S. Army Rangers and Green Berets respectively.} Although MAP only accounted for an average of 10 percent of Guatemala’s total defense budget between 1963 and 1966, the vast majority of Guatemala’s funds were dedicated to personnel pay and allowances or operations and maintenance. In 1964, only one percent of the Guatemalan defense budget was spent towards force improvement.\footnote{Shirley, 208-209. The average for force improvement in 1964 was 9\% in Latin America.} Thus, MAP contribution towards military development in Guatemala was significant.\footnote{Ibid. According to Shirley, “When Guatemala’s $100,000 in expenditures for force improvement was combined with the $1.1 million in MAP funds expended on Guatemalan force improvement, total Guatemalan force improvement reached $1.2 million” and comprised 92\% of the total.} In addition, 1963 marked the first year USAID funds went to equip the army which included the transfer of resources meant for civic action towards improving counter-insurgency capabilities units.\footnote{McClintock, 56-57.} In 1966, the State Department reported that two H19 helicopters, originally part of the “Civic Action Squadron,” were reallocated “due to the increase in internal security operations” and converted into the “Special Air Warfare unit with the composite missions of coastal patrol, target locations, psychological operations, medical aid-evacuation and trooplift.”\footnote{“U.S. Internal Security Programs in Latin America: Guatemala,” 30 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00318.} Therefore, U.S. military assistance to the Guatemalan armed forces contributed to its material strength and capabilities to engage in counter-insurgency, but it was incapable of correcting institutional deficiencies that plagued the security system.
The United States attempt to professionalize the armed forces failed due to the Guatemalan military’s unwillingness to address institutional problems. In 1966, the State Department complained that even though an average of $636,000 per year was provided in training, there remained many “institutional deficiencies” hindering the effectiveness of U.S. investment in the army. For instance, U.S. analysts cried that by the time poorly-paid conscripts, who serve two year terms, were adequately trained, they were back in civilian life.\(^{64}\) As a result, the State Department concluded that despite gains in material support, equipment and training, the armed forces was still a “cumbersome, antiquated and inefficient organization.”\(^{65}\) The lack of professionalization and effectiveness of the military was evident in the fact that after five years of U.S. assistance they were unable, or unwilling, to defeat the few guerrillas that existed in the eastern countryside.\(^{66}\) Although the U.S. contributed to the material strength and expansion of the Guatemalan military, financial assistance and training alone were insufficient to create a strong, professional and unified army.

The Méndez administration presented an opportunity for the United States to exert influence in counter-insurgency operations. Shortly after Méndez took office, a U.S. Joint State-Defense statement demonstrated a revived interest in counter-insurgency and contemplated the possibility of providing “crash counter-insurgency training [to] specific military units (e.g. Zacapa brigade).”\(^{67}\) Moreover, a U.S. Special Forces Mobile Training Team in 1967 helped organize the Special Commando Unit of the Guatemalan

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\(^{64}\) Ibid. Short terms of conscription, lack of education and lack of professional non-commissioned officers contributed to the difficulties of training.

\(^{65}\) Ibid.


Army (SCUGA) which became involved in counter-terror and illegal operations. Yet, U.S. training and assistance to the security system became counter productive to the goals of the Alliance for Progress as it contributed to excessive violence and political instability. In 1968, Viron P. Vaky, a State Department official, criticized the role of the U.S. in Guatemala’s counter-insurgency by stating:

We have condoned counter-terror [and] may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it…Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counter-insurgency weapon?

Thus, the United States assisted in the development of the Guatemalan military which utilized the expansion of the security system to create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity that permitted them to become the dominant force within the political system.

Counter-Insurgency and the Defeat of the Left

The Guatemalan armed forces launched a renovated counter-insurgency campaign in October 1966 against the guerrillas in the eastern-countryside; by the end of Méndez’s term thousands of civilians were dead and leftist and reformist elements in the political system were almost non-existent. The three central figureheads of the campaign were Minister of Defense Col. Arriaga; Commander of the Zacapa-Izabal Military Zone, Col. Carlos Arana Osorio; and Vice-Minister of National Defense for Coordinating Counter-Insurgency, Col. Manuel Francisco Sosa Avila. The initial success of the military included the wounding of MR-13 leader Yon Sosa and the death of FAR’s second-in-command which received a great deal of press coverage. According to the State

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70 McClintock, 79. Both Arriaga and Arana were classmates at the Escuela Politecnica and graduated together in 1939.
Department, the new “anti-communist image of the government” due to the success of the new offensive weakened right-wing arguments for a coup.\(^{71}\) Yet the adoption and implementation of counter-insurgency gave way to counter-terror measures, characterized by extra-judicial murders, political violence and the persecution of leftists, reformists and members of the PR.

Among the most controversial features of the Guatemalan counter-insurgency was the use of anti-communist death squads which had ties to the military. The *Mano Blanca* was the first and only unit created independently from the armed forces by the MLN in 1966 to prevent Méndez from taking office. Thereafter, it openly justified counter-terror by declaring that it would use “the same violence used by the communists” and engaged in psychological warfare through bombing and death threats.\(^{72}\) In 1967, there were at least twenty death squads operating in Guatemala City that produced death lists labeling people as communists who were then targeted for murder. These death lists were often published with people’s mug shots from police files and passport photographs accessible only to the Ministry of Interior indicating an unofficial relationship with the government.\(^{73}\)

With the exception of *Mano Blanca*, these death squads were all phantom organizations constructed to permit the armed forces to carry out illegal operations. According to the State Department, the most infamous death squads were covers “for clandestine army commando units” to carry out extra-judicial executions. In addition,

\(^{71}\)“Guatemala: Army Gains Initiative against Insurgents,” 1 Dec 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00319; Mein to Secretary of State, 26 Nov 1966, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00317. Also in October 1966, Turcios Lima died in car accident leading FAR to experience a leadership crisis. At this point in time, the MR-13 led by Yon Sosa split from FAR for ideological and personalistic differences.


\(^{73}\)McClintock, 86.
these phantom units were “formed by well trained and highly motivated younger military personnel [and] provided the high command with an outlet [to satiate] impatient younger officers clamoring for action,” many of whom were trained by the United States.\(^74\) The two elite units involved in illicit and covert operations were SCUGA and the Fourth Corps within the National Police. SCUGA was a thirty-five man commando unit composed of young anti-Communist army officers and extreme right-wing civilians. The State Department reported that the commando unit was performing extra-legal activities such as bombings, abductions and assassinations against “real and alleged communists” and other “vaguely defined enemies of the government.”\(^75\) The Forth Corps was a fifty man illegal assassination squad that operated in secrecy from the other members of the National Police and occasionally worked with *Mano Blanca* to carry out counter-terror. Both of these units took direct orders from Arriaga as well as Sosa in the case of the Forth Corps.\(^76\) The danger of these units became apparent when the military utilized them for political purposes to threaten, abduct or assassinate dissenting voices against the armed forces. A favorite target became the PR, which at the time was the most organized and biggest opposition to the Guatemalan military. The State Department reported in 1967 that all PR deputies in Congress had received death threats from death squads which had connection to the clandestine units. In October 1967, SCUGA was implicated in a plot to assassinate four PR Congressmen but became “postponed,” probably because the

\(^{74}\) “Guatemala: Vigilantism Poses Threat to Stability,” 12 May 1967, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00332. Among the most prominent death squads/phantom organizations were the New Anti-Communist Organization and the Guatemalan Anti-Communist Movement. Military involvement in death squads became an open secret but continued to provide a cover to operate outside of the law.


\(^{76}\) Ibid.
plan had been discovered.⁷⁷ Hence, death squads provided the military the opportunity to operate outside of the law with impunity.

Armed civilians or *comisionados* proved to be the most effective element of the counter-insurgency operations in Zacapa and Izabal. Before the 1960’s, *comisionados* were former military personnel and part of the army reserves used to recruit peasants and indigenous people into the army. Beginning with Peralta, these civilians began to serve as informants to the military and under the Arriaga were expanded to actively combat the guerrillas. In 1966, the brigades in Zacapa and Izabal under the direction of Arana, issued weapons to over 3,000 to 5,000 civilians to participate in the counter-insurgency campaign.⁷⁸ The overwhelming majority of *comisionados* in Zacapa and Izabal were members of the MLN. Not surprisingly, many of these armed civilians participated in counter-terror and massacred peasants with impunity and harassed PR members which again served to weaken a strong oppositional force to the military.⁷⁹ These *comisionados* pledged allegiance to Arana and the armed forces and remained a valuable asset in the counter-insurgency movement.

By the beginning of 1968 the counter-insurgency campaign was characterized with escalating political violence and repression against all voices of opposition, peasants as well as members of the president’s own political party. At the height of the conflict, it was estimated that forty-three persons were killed or kidnapped every week.⁸⁰ Between 1966 and 1970, an estimated 8,000 civilians died as a result of the counter-insurgency,

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⁷⁷ Ibid.
⁷⁹ Ibid.
⁸⁰ Levenson-Estrada, 45
the majority being unarmed peasants. U.S. officials were increasingly concerned with the brutality, complexity and difficulties for the government to control the various counter-insurgency operations in Guatemala. In a secret State Department document entitled “Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?” Thomas L. Hughes warned:

[the] continued use of…rough and ready counter-insurgency tactics…brings into serious question the ability of President Méndez…or even [Arriaga] to control the activities of the counter-insurgents…the counter-insurgency machine is out of control.82

Moreover, members of Méndez’s own political party were complaining about the violence directed at them and were refusing to run for local office in Zacapa and Izabal, at times leaving the MLN to be the only candidate running for office. During the 1967 municipal elections, national representatives for the PR visiting Zacapa to ensure that the PR was running for every position, were met with resistance from potential candidates and only filled a small fraction of the slots. Furthermore, public outrage over the violence increased with the torture, rape and mutilation of Rogelia Cruz Martínez, the former Miss Guatemala, by extreme-rightist. The incident was followed by the assassination of the Chief of the U.S. Military Mission, Col. John D. Webber and Naval Attaché Lieutenant Commander Ernest A. Munro, at the hands of the guerrillas. By 1968, political violence was becoming uncontrollable, but Mendez continued to hesitantly allow the military to engage in counter-insurgency operations with impunity.

Méndez’s tolerance for the armed forces abuse of violence peaked with the March 1968 kidnapping of Archbishop Mario Casariego in a rightist attempt to oust the

81 Jonas, 63.
82 “Guatemala: A Counter-insurgency Running Wild?,” 23 Oct 1967, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00348. Hughes was the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research for the State Department.
83 “Report of Field Trip,” 20 Nov 1967, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00350. For example, in 1967, an MLN candidate was the only one running for mayor in Gualan.
84 McClintock, 94-95.
president by blaming the crime on the guerrillas to stir public outrage. The Embassy was alarmed to discover the involvement of many high-level officers in the conspiracy such as the head of SCUGA, and possibly Arriaga and Arana.85 But the kidnapping did not have its intended effect. The United States denounced any attempt to oust the president and public outrage did not manifest, forcing the kidnappers to abandon the Archbishop in a farmhouse. Yet the role of Arriaga and Arana never came to light and the incident was surrounded with ambiguity, especially after two of the kidnappers were suspiciously gunned down by unknown assailants while in police custody.86

As a result of the coup attempt, Méndez in an astonishing act removed Arriaga, Arana and Sosa from their military positions and sent them into “exile” by assigning them to diplomatic posts. The president’s move was intended to end the constriction of the armed forces on the government and halt counter-terror. According to the CIA, the three exiled officers were surprised by Mendez’s action but were “unwilling to risk an open split in the armed forces” and left Guatemala without protest while “resist[ing] the urgings” of their strong followings within the military and armed civilians to retaliate.87 The president’s replacements for these posts were described by the CIA as “second-rate officers [who] lacked qualifications” in counter-insurgency, sparking dissension among the young officers who “voiced a lack of confidence” in their new leaders.88 To make matters worse for the military, Méndez ordered the removal of weapons in the possession of 3,000 armed civilians, purged the military of extreme-rightist officers, disbanded the

85 “Mein to Secretary of State,” 30 Mar 1968, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00363; “Weekly Summary,” 29 Mar 1968, NSA, Guatemala 1954-1999, #00366. The State Department speculated that the plot was scheduled to coincide with Arriaga’s trip to the United States in March. The Vice-President was also implicated and PR leaders demanded his resignation without success.
86 Handy, 163; McClintock, 94-95. The location of the farmhouse was in Quetzaltenango.
88 Ibid.
Fourth Corps and downsized SCUGA. Although Méndez demonstrated resiliency to decrease the power of the armed forces, his efforts only motivated the military to further unite against civilian interference in national security and what they perceived to be a breach on their autonomy.

The shake-up of the security system increased military cohesiveness, animosity against Méndez and ambitions to rule Guatemala. After Méndez’s sweeping changes, the MLN and the PID joined “in an electoral pact to insure the unity” of the right and the military for the 1970 presidential elections. Aiding the MLN-PID for the 1970 elections was the resurgence of FAR activity two years after the start of the 1966 counter-insurgency campaign. More importantly, the assassination of Ambassador Mein renewed calls from the public, the U.S. and the military for harsh counter-insurgency measures. In addition, by the 1970s, many leftists, PR members and voters became disenchanted with the electoral process which had allowed Méndez to ascend to power but not carry out social or economic reform. As a result, many leftists either opted to leave the PR and join the newly legalized Christian Democrats or abstain from voting. Furthermore, the military was still present in the countryside and intimidated the peasantry into supporting the MLN-PID. Thus, by the time the MLN-PID coalition nominated Arana as their presidential candidate, Guatemalans were either disillusioned about participating within the electoral system; or supported (forced or freely) Arana’s

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92 McClintock, 96-7. McClintock suspects that the MLN may have been behind Mein’s assassination, who was the first U.S. ambassador to be killed abroad.
93 Handy 166-167. Of 6 million people, only 546,000 votes were cast for the 1970 presidential elections.
platform of security and order, allowing him to win the presidency. In contrast to the 1966 elections, the weak and almost non-existent left-of-center was now split between the Christian Democrats and the PR whereas the right and military were strongly unified under the MLN-PID coalition.

With Arana gaining the presidency in 1970 through the MLN-PID coalition, Peralta’s goal of institutionalizing the military as the dominant force in the political system was accomplished. Soon after taking office, Arana again initiated a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in which 700 political deaths occurred between November 1970 and March 1971, further weakening military opposition. The MLN-PID coalition won again in the 1974 presidential elections with Gen. Kjell Laugerud. Although the MLN-PID coalition broke down for the 1978 elections, the PID was able to claim victory with Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia. With Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia. Throughout the 1970s, the military began to engage in business and development projects that incremented the officer corps’ wealth, thus furthering the military’s transition from protector of the elite to becoming part of the elite. Arana established the Army Bank which granted loans to officers to begin private businesses and many development project loans from international banks often ended in the pockets of officers. Although Gen. Lucas Garcia was overthrown by Gen. Efrain Rios Montt in 1982, the military remained in control of the government until 1985 when it transitioned the presidency to civilian Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo. Despite this official shift in the presidency, the military prevented Cerezo to exercise real authority.

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94 Ibid, 169-175  
95 Shirley, 286-288
similar to Mendez’s term in office. After 1970, the military ruled without opposition in the political system, even after it transitioned to “democracy” in the 1980s.

Conclusion

Peralta’s overthrow of Ydigoras in 1963 marked the initial rise of the military state in Guatemala. Although Peralta was able to limit the political process, division and inexperience among officers as state rulers made them incapable to engage in power sharing, thus splitting the military in the 1966 elections. As a result, the presidency slipped to a civilian which eventually led the military to cooperate as a unit to regain formal authority in 1970. With the assistance of the U.S. to equip and support the army’s call for internal security, the military was able to launch a brutal counter-insurgency in 1966 that served to reduce the MLN’s desire to initiate a coup as well as unify the military in combating a common enemy, the guerrillas, who up to 1966 were disregarded as a serious threat. In addition, the presence of the guerrilla’s provided the justification for military repression which went unabated until Méndez gained enough courage to briefly stop counter-terror through a military shake-up. Although the military had the power to overthrow Méndez, many anti-government plots were abandoned due to the United States’ support for Méndez. Consequently, the military formed the MLN-PID alliance which survived into the mid-1970s, leading to a closed political system characterized with excessive violence and repression against oppositional forces. These conditions fueled social unrest that eventually gave rise to various guerrilla movements in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating the failure of the Alliance for Progress to prevent revolutionary movements and promote democracy. In conclusion, the Guatemalan armed

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96 Ibid, 312-313.
forces in the 1960s utilized counter-insurgency to triumph over fractionalization as well as to consolidate the Guatemalan military state in 1970.
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At the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Peoples Republic of China, and revolutionary Cuba would seem to have been steadfast allies in the struggle against imperialism and neocolonialism. Each of the three regimes had come into existence through violent revolutions. The Bolsheviks under V. I. Lenin in 1917 had contributed to the overthrow of Czar Nicholas and consolidated power in an internal struggle against the other revolutionary and counterrevolutionary groups in order to reassemble much of the former Russian Empire into the USSR. The Communists under Mao Zedong in 1949 had emerged triumphant in a post-World War II armed struggle against the Nationalist party of Chiang Kai-shek. Just one decade later, rural guerrillas led by Fidel Castro defeated the army of the dictator Fulgencio Batista. Castro’s political organization, the Movimiento 26 de Julio, eventually gained the cooperation of the Cuban Communists to consolidate power against former collaborators in the struggle against Batista as well as counterrevolutionaries.

Political consolidation in each of these revolutionary regimes shared many commonalities. The national state became powerful and centralized. The regimes also confiscated foreign enterprises, seized landed estates, and mobilized peasants and workers to
defend the revolution from hostile foreign powers.¹ In the 1960s, all three regimes considered the United States to be their primary enemy, Cuba existing just 90 miles offshore from this “imperialist” power.

Despite sharing revolutionary origins, unity of purpose did not characterize the tripartite relationship between these three regimes in the 1960s. The PRC and the USSR developed a long-simmering rivalry that split the socialist countries into two hostile encampments and Cuba, isolated geographically from its socialist allies, attempted to create its own independent path. They argued over economic and foreign policies and disputed leadership of the international communist movement. Why did three revolutionary regimes find it so difficult to find common purpose, despite being surrounded by capitalist enemies and their client states?

To date, little scholarship exists on the relationship between China and Cuba. On the other hand, scholars have analyzed well the developing relationship between revolutionary Cuba and the USSR.² This article seeks to create a tripartite perspective in which scholars may develop a more perfect knowledge of the options, opportunities, and disadvantages the Cuban Revolution confronted as its leaders sought the assistance of a fractured socialist bloc in their struggle against the Cuban counterrevolution and the United States. Even so, our understanding of relations between these socialist republics comes from Western sources, particularly United States documents. Top secret US reports of the Central Intelligence Agency and military and


diplomatic intelligence units have been declassified in the 1990s. They are easily accessible in the National Security Council collections of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Presidential Libraries. There is also a digitized collection of CIA reports at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. This documentation now permits us scholars to investigate some of the official contacts between Cuba, the Peoples Republic of China, and the Soviet Union. There is one caveat: these documents amount to what US intelligence gatherers understood about Cuba, China, and the USSR. Scholars eventually will have to utilize top secret documents of these three countries to determine what US security agents did not know.

Here is what US documents demonstrate. In the first instance, the timing of the three revolutions had placed the Soviet Union and China on different trajectories by the time that Cuba became socialist in the 1960s. Since only ten years separated the revolutionary triumphs of China in 1949 and of Cuba in 1959, these two regimes found much in common. Both shared origins in the countryside in alliances with peasants. Only the scale was much different, 350 million people in China and 7 million in Cuba in the revolutionary age. Both China and Cuba believed in confronting imperialism with armed struggle. They shared the belief that spreading revolution to other countries would provide for the survival and longevity of the young revolutions encircled by enemies.

In contrast, the USSR had reached the age of maturity in the 1960s. It concerned itself less with radical ideological purity and more with modernizing its economy and competing against the West. Soviet leaders promoted détente and mutual trade with the capitalist powers as a strategy to preserve the USSR and international socialism. The Soviets wished to avoid entering into World War III with the West. In an age of nuclear missiles, they thought both sides would annihilate each other. Of the three revolutionary regimes, only the USSR had an
industrial economy, possessed nuclear weapons, developed rocket science, and had just bested the United States in thrusting the first satellite (the Sputnik) into space. It had also developed security after World War II by creating a buffer zone of satellite socialist states between Moscow and Western Europe.

In addition, Cuba as the most recent revolution would have preferred not to align itself to either side in the Sino-Soviet Rift, which broke into the open in the late 1950s. Fidel Castro wished to benefit from the patronage of both the Soviets and the Chinese. But Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mao Zedong required Cuba to choose sides; they alternated between courting Cuban leaders and threatening them. Only when Cuba’s concerted efforts to “export revolution” finally ended in failure in 1967 did Fidel Castro make a pragmatic rather than ideological bargain with the USSR. Interestingly, domestic power disputes among the leadership within each of the three socialist counties affected the ebb and flow of the international relations between their revolutionary governments. That being said, the Sino-Soviet Dispute contained many opportunities for the fledgling socialist republic in the Caribbean. Cuban revolutionaries creatively exploited the differences between rival communist states, thereby obtaining quickly the resources it required to defeat US counterrevolutionary incursions and establish security for the revolution.

Cuba’s Search for Allies

The Soviets and Chinese were maintaining a tenuous but fitful unity in the international socialist movement just as the Cuban Revolution burst onto the scene. Indeed, the fissures developed during China’s lengthy revolutionary process, when Stalin intervened in Chinese
affairs beginning in the 1920s. Stalin even supported the forces of the nationalist Chiang Kai-shek and regarded the eventual triumph of Mao as premature. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, Mao laid claim to leadership of international communist revolutionary movement. The Chinese party leaders had gained confidence in its military stalemate against US forces in Korea, and remained bellicose against the Americans for protecting the exiled nationalist government on Taiwan and for keeping the PRC from becoming the Chinese representative in the United Nations.³ In the 1950s, Mao pursued the development of an atomic bomb in the face of opposition from Nikita Khrushchev, who had declared Asia as a nuclear free zone. Then in 1960, the Soviets withdrew from China all technicians and economic aid in protest to China’s efforts to industrialize and collectivize its economy in the Great Leap Forward program.⁴ Thereafter, moderate Chinese leaders led by Liu Shaoqi, who were adopting Soviet economic models in order to promote economic recovery, yielded to Mao’s hard line in foreign policy⁵ The Chinese objected to Khrushchev’s policies of economic aid to non-Communist bourgeois governments abroad, the diplomatic and trade relations with the United States, and the Soviet economic reforms emphasizing decentralization and monetary incentives. Khrushchev came to Peking for the Tenth anniversary celebration of the Revolution and exchanged views with Mao and other Chinese leaders. No consensus being reached, the Soviets and Chinese did not bother to issue the normal joint communiqué. Thereafter, the Soviets used classic texts by V. I. Lenin to criticize

⁵ Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 82-83.
“contemporary left-wing deviationism,” and the Chinese replied that “imperialism can never be trusted.”

However, owing to its historic leadership of international Communism, the Kremlin could count on the loyalty of Communist parties throughout the world to remain in the Soviet rather than the Sino camp. The CIA estimated that, in Latin America alone, where the Soviets maintained 21 diplomatic and consular missions in five countries, communist party membership numbered nearly a quarter of a million persons. The “sympathizers” were estimated to number an additional 650,000.

At the time of the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, February 1959, it was not yet clear what ideological trajectory the month-old Cuban Revolution would take. But Castro had lifted all pre-revolutionary restrictions on the 17,000 member Cuban Communist party, the Partido Socialista del Pueblo (PSP), and utilized longtime members such as Blas Roca, Lázaro Peña, and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to make initial contacts within the Communist World. Some PSP leaders attended the 21st Congress. There Soviet leaders warned them that the new Cuban regime may “go to the right” just like Gamal Abdal Nasser who, they claimed, had betrayed the “anti-imperialist and anti-feudal” Egyptian revolution. They stressed trade union organization and publicity campaigns against military budgets and against US bases and missions. This strategy amounted to the official Soviet doctrine for revolution in Latin America, whose capitalist structures were considered too immature to be conducive to


revolution. The Latin American communists in attendance reportedly respected and submitted to Soviet leadership but complained “about Soviet aloofness.”

Some Latin American leaders traveled to Peking (today Beijing) following the Congress and were well received by Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, chairmen of the party and the state, respectively. Chinese leaders explained their own anti-imperialist policies as distracting and dispersing imperialist forces and forcing them “to spread themselves thin over a vast area.” The PRC sought to “strike blows against the United States without engaging directly in military actions with the United States.” The Cuban revolution had demonstrated that “the battle could be carried to the imperialist rear.”

Mao also advocated the union of Latin American countries into one national entity, in order to strengthen the fight against imperialism. The Chinese planned to set up training programs for Latin American communist leaders.

In the immediate aftermath of its Great Leap industrialization project, which the CIA counted as a failure of “mismanagement” and which historians credit with famine and starvation, the PRC seemed poised to challenge Soviet leadership in the world. The challenge to Moscow coincided with the demotion of Mao’s leadership within the Chinese government. Peking moderated its domestic economic policies against Mao’s wishes and simultaneously engaged with the world according to Mao’s own hard line.

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8 CIA, “Soviet Bloc Efforts at Penetration of Latin America,” 14 Mar 58; CIA, “Observation of Latin American CP Delegations to the 21st CPSU Congress and Their Experiences with CP China in Peking.” [date blocked out], White House, Office of the Staff Secretary, Series, Alpha Side Series [hereafter WH], box 7; both in Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas [hereafter Eisenhower Library].

9 C. P. Cabell to A. J. Goodpaster, 11 Apr 1959, WH, Eisenhower Library.

10 CIA, “‘Big Leap’ Falters Because of Mismanagement,” Feb 1959, CREST. Historians estimate that upwards of 30 million Chinese perished as a result of the failures of the Great Leap Forward. Meissner, Mao’s China and After, 237.

At the time of the Revolution, Cuba did not have diplomatic relations with either communist power, but Fidel Castro’s entourage sought out relations with the socialist republics in his attempt to cultivate allies against US interests. Throughout 1959, Cuba exchanged visitors with the countries behind the Iron Curtain. No one seemed to coordinate these efforts, which reflected the many different political agendas in play during those first months following the fall of Batista. Raúl Castro, himself a member of the PSP, first initiated contact with the Soviets for reasons of military defense. He dispatched long-time Communist labor leader Lázaro Peña to Moscow with a request for military and intelligence trainers. This trip occurred in April 1959 while Fidel Castro was on tour in the United States and resulted in the arrival of veterans of the Spanish Civil War to instruct soldiers in Marxism. Neither Fidel nor the Soviets, in their secret communications, wanted to provoke the United States. The Cubans at first sought only trade ties with Communist Bloc countries. “No weapons,” Fidel told one KGB officer. “We do not ask for any.” But the Soviets came to understand two important facts by the end of the first year of the Revolution: that the PSP did not necessarily speak for Fidel and that his two closest collaborators, brother Raúl and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, were already speaking privately about “the construction of socialism.”

Historians have fewer details about the early contacts between the Cuban revolutionaries and the People’s Republic of China. US intelligence reports about these first encounters accomplished little to convince anyone that Cuba in 1959 was becoming a socialist power. Comandante William Gálvez, made an extended good-will tour of socialist countries early in

13 Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 27, 29. The authors base this valuable study on some Soviet documentation.
1959. He had two audiences with Chairman Mao Zedong. Gálvez informed the Communist Party leader that the Cuban people desired to intensify their “intimate relationship” with the Chinese people in opposition to the “imperialists of the US.” A Cuba-China Friendship Association was inaugurated in Havana in May 1959.\footnote{14} In August, Cuban diplomat Miguel Angel Campos visited China and made the point that Fidel Castro’s policies were not pro-communist. Campos claimed that Castro aimed to eradicate poverty, raise the people’s standard of living and wipe out the poverty that bred communism.\footnote{15} Cuban delegates began attending Communist international meetings, such as the one in Peking commemorating the Tenth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution. Comandante Faure Chomón of the Directorio Revolucionario, a revolutionary group allied to Castro but not to the PSP, led the delegation. He praised the Chinese revolution but claimed that communism would not work in Cuba. “If anyone tried to take the country down the path of Communism,” he said, “he would fail because the people would not support him.”\footnote{16} Despite his opinions (or perhaps because of them), Faure Chomón would serve as Cuba’s first ambassador in Moscow.

Both the Soviet and Chinese leaders responded quickly if cautiously to Cuban requests for assistance. While Fidel’s challenge to the United States piqued their interest, the growing breach between the Soviets and Chinese explains the attentions that both powers lavished on the Cubans. Each Communist superpower was looking to enlist allies against the other. Vice Premier Anastas Mikoyan arrived with a Russian Trade Fair in January 1960. The Cubans were rather dismissive of the quality of the products displayed at the fair, but they welcomed Mikoyan

wholeheartedly. The Soviets cooperated in providing petroleum to Cuba, such that Fidel could end dependence on US controlled oil supplies coming from Venezuela. Shell and Standard Oil’s refusal to process Soviet crude in its Cuban refineries, on the advice of the US Treasury Department, provided Castro the excuse to nationalize the industry.

However, the Cubans actively sought Soviet Bloc weapons after the March 1960 explosion of the *Le Coubre*, a French vessel bearing Belgium arms, in Havana Harbor. Fidel blamed CIA agents of sabotage in the incident, and throughout the rest of the year kept up his charges that the US was preparing an invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev still hesitated to conclude a formal Soviet arms deal just yet, but he liked Fidel’s anti-American diatribes. In July, he pleased the Cuban revolutionaries with a statement indicating his willingness to use Soviet military forces in protecting the Revolution from US intervention. “Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire should the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare to start [an] intervention against Cuban,” Khrushchev said. Raúl Castro made his first trip to Moscow within a few days of this announcement and learned that the Kremlin would send rifles and a few older tanks to Cuba free of charge – not from the Soviets but from the Czechs. “We don’t want war and you don’t either,” Khrushchev explained to the visiting chief of the Cuban armed forces.17

Just before the meeting the Soviet Premier, Raúl Castro had received a briefing on the “incorrect views” of the Chinese leadership. Khrushchev soon seized a high-profile opportunity of the United Nations meeting to demonstrate his support of the Cuban Revolution. As soon as the Soviet premier arrived in New York in September, he went straight to meet the Cuban leader at

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Fidel’s hotel in Harlem. The photo of Khrushchev giving a bear hug to a taller, younger Castro appeared in newspapers around the world.18

China too was becoming interested in supporting the Cuban Revolution. In January 1960, Peking increased China’s hand-outs of money and arms to Africa and Latin America. Mao was also sending financial aide to the Algerian uprising against French colonialism and to the Albanian Communist government, which dissented from Soviet policies.19 Longtime Cuban communist Blas Roca arrived in Peking and received a warm welcome. The government officials invited him to address the nation via television, the first foreign dignitary to do so. He informed the Chinese of Cuba’s land reform, growth of the people’s militias, and confiscations of American properties. By June 1960, the US government had learned of the presence of Chinese technicians in military training centers and in the Cuban institute of agrarian reform. CIA Director Allen Dulles said he was expecting diplomatic recognition between the two countries— even a visit of Zhou Enlai (which never eventuated). Chinese dance troupes, youth groups, and trade delegations arrived in Havana.20 Already, Washington worried about Castro’s control of the revolution and his flirtation with socialism. The CIA received instructions from President Dwight D. Eisenhower to support Fidel’s political opponents inside and outside of Cuba. Those counterrevolutionaries consisted of anti-Castro rebels in the remote mountains of the island and armed exile groups operating in the Caribbean Basin and Miami.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the Argentina-born revolutionary associate of Fidel Castro, emerged as the most steadfast ideological collaborator of the Soviets and Chinese. Guevara had studied Mao and other theorists on guerrilla warfare during his military training with Castro in Mexico. Mao’s emphasis on the peasant base certainly informed his 1960 publication, *Guerrilla Warfare*.\(^{21}\) As the chief planner for the socialization of the Cuban economy, Che led a delegation to the USSR and PRC in the last months of 1960 and the first month of 1961. He stopped in Moscow twice on this trip, and had moderate success selling sugar to and obtaining loans from the USSR on his first stop in Moscow.\(^{22}\) The Kremlin courted him as a distinguished visitor. He stood with the Soviet Presidium atop Lenin’s Tomb during the parade in Red Square commemorating the October 1917 revolution. While in Moscow, Che ignored Sino-Soviet differences that emerged from the international conference of world communist parties. A member of communist old guard, Aníbal Escalante, attended the meetings as Cuba’s representative. The Sino-Soviet dispute became sharply defined at this conference. As CIA director Allen Dulles described it in a briefing for President Eisenhower: “The chief Chinese Communist delegate . . . made a four hour speech attacking Khrushchev personally. Khrushchev was alleged to have lost his temper twice.”\(^{23}\) This competition proved beneficial to the Cubans because each communist superpower sought to enlist the newest revolution on its side.

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On arriving subsequently in Peking, Che Guevara again received the red carpet treatment, which he accepted uncritically. He gave a talk at the Sino-American Friendship Association, where the audience greeted him with a standing ovation lasting several minutes. Che’s speech did not express a preference between the Soviets or the Chinese but assumed an international communist unity that scarcely existed. He praised Nikita Khrushchev for pledging to defend Cuba “in the face of imperialism.” He even acknowledged Soviet leadership: “China, in conjunction with the other socialist countries headed by the Soviet Union, has opened a new historical era in extending generous aid.” He had several meetings with Chairman Mao, who charmed Che by praising his writing on revolution. Later Che came away with a $60 million loan that Zhou Enlai assured him “was not disinterested.” The Chinese considered Cuba to be at the forefront of the anti-imperialist struggle. If Cuba could not repay the loan, Zhou told Che, “[it was] not at all important.” Che subsequently signed an agreement there to sell one million tons of Cuban sugar. Concluded Che, “Truly, China is one of those countries where you realize that the Cuban revolution is not a unique event.”

In Peking, Che revealed that Cuba was urging other Latin American countries to follow its example of the armed uprising. US intelligence reports concluded that Guevara was “apparently siding with the Chinese on several key points in the Sino-Soviet dispute.” He especially backed the Chinese position on the need for revolutionary struggle by Communist parties in the developing countries. He said at one reception that the Chinese revolution “has

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revealed a new road for the Americas.” Moreover, the Chinese invited 200 Cubans to receive technical training in China. Pictures appeared in the Cuban press of Che Guevara with Mao and Zhou Enlai. Che went next to North Korea, while another Cuban delegation signed an agreement of mutual recognition with North Vietnam. Soviet leaders apparently did not want to be outdone by the generosity of the Chinese. On his way back to Cuba through Moscow, Che received increased offers of loans above and beyond the Chinese credit levels.

Che Guevara as chief economist of Cuba sought sugar sales and economic assistance in order to underwrite his elaborate plans to convert the island nation into an industrial power. The socialist countries did not disappoint him. They promised to purchase Cuban sugar at the “subsidized price of four cents per pound.” The USSR and PRC subscribed to a purchase of one million tons each, and the other East European and Asian socialist republics agreed to purchase two million more. Guevara also acquired Soviet and East European agreements for the Cuban acquisition of factories, petroleum, textiles, foodstuffs, chemicals, paper, and technicians to run the new factories. But as Che was to discover, the Soviet factories turned out to be neither new nor efficient.

At the time, Guevara sought to make Cuba economically independent by becoming industrialized and he expected Socialist countries to provide assistance. The Soviets committed capital at 2.5 percent interest and no payments for ten years as well as technology to build a steel plant in Cuba. The Chinese also provided credit but did not require any interest at all. “Find me

a capitalist country that would do the same!” Che exclaimed. Eventually, he wanted to phase out Cuba’s dependency on sugar. But the Soviets did not approve of Che’s plans for industrialization any more than they had liked China’s Great Leap Forward. “Guevara was impossible,” said Anatoly Dobrynin, “he wanted a little steel mill, [and] an automobile factory. We told him Cuba wasn’t big enough to support an industrial economy. They needed hard currency, and the only way to earn it was to do what they did best—grow sugar.” Ultimately, Che’s plans did not succeed despite the assistance of his socialist economic partners. The factories they sent him were outmoded and inefficient, and Cuba’s own economic miscalculations contributed to a decline in the once formidable sugar industry. “Another point that adds to Guevara’s bitterness against the Russians,” CIA analysts observed, “is that they have refused the help that he considered necessary for the immediate development of the industry of Cuba and insisted that the country concentrate on agricultural development.”

But as Che Guevara developed his economic programs based on moral incentives, tight state controls, and voluntary labor, the economy responded with deteriorating production. He began to turn against Soviet economic models as well as Eastern European technology, which he found deficient. In the end, Che opposed Moscow’s introduction of the theory of value, prices, and profits as playing any role in the proper “socialist” economy. “The moment you introduce profits into the socialist economy,” he said, “you subvert socialism to capitalist revisionism.” But the stalwart communists of the old Peoples Socialist Party, notably Carlos Rafael Rodríguez,

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criticized rigid state controls and upheld Khrushchev’s model of economic incentives. Said Rodriguez: “the economy must run on profit, must earn” or else the national economy cannot “grow, develop, or advance.”

This debate went on during Che’s entire term as President of the National Bank and then as chief of industry. In the end, Che relinquished his economic oversight in July 1964, despite the fact that Fidel continued the ideas of moral incentives and strict state controls under the economic leadership of Orlando Borrego, Che’s protégé. However, Fidel decided to end the industrialization model and return to sugar production, even though the Soviets still disapproved of the lack of material incentives and decentralization.

There remained on other aspect in which Che Guevara posed a problem for Sino-Soviet relations. He was an unrepentant revolutionist. Che often quoted one of Fidel’s early dictums, “The duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution,” and Castro would not renounce Cuba’s right to “export revolution” to other Latin American countries. “In the underdeveloped America the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting,” Che wrote in this classic primer Guerrilla Warfare. Also he said that “the guerrilla fighter is above all an agrarian revolutionary.”

In this policy, the Cubans remained true to Chinese ideological tenets. US intelligence had recognized this tension in 1963 when it predicted “friction in Soviet-Cuban relations,” because Castro wanted “all the benefits of Soviet economic and military aid but insist[ed] upon a unique position


33 Ernesto Che Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press), 7, 11.
in the Bloc without submitting to the discipline and control imposed on Soviet Satellites.”
Thus did rising disagreements within the socialist world complicate Cuba’s foreign and domestic policies.

The Sino-Soviet Rift

Khrushchev’s plans for reform inside the Soviet communist party, including reducing the cult of personality (also known as de-Stalinization) and the foreign policy of “peaceful coexistence” threatened relations with the Chinese. The latter assumed that the Khrushchev was also attempting to subordinate the position of Mao Zedong as the foremost living revolutionary of the international communist movement. He did not see the Revolution as completed, and said “Our revolutions come one after another.” He referred to a near continuous process since 1949 of land reform, socialization of the economy, and development of ideology. The process constantly destabilized internal politics. Therefore, Peking continued to advocate direct revolutionary confrontation, particularly in underdeveloped areas, while the Soviets believed that such actions might provoke a devastating nuclear war. As the Soviet premier once said, “We always seek to direct the development of events in a way which ensures that, while defending the interests of the socialist camp, we do not provide the imperialist provocateurs with a chance to unleash a new world war.” The Chinese dismissed such dangers. Mao told Khrushchev that

35 Chen, Mao’s China, 72. On internal politics as a far in external relations, see especially Chapter 3.
China could survive a nuclear war because it had 500 million more people than the USSR.\textsuperscript{36} The Kremlin preferred to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the United States and assumed responsibility for protecting its socialist allies with Soviet ICBMs. Moscow said it had “serious doubts concerning the foreign policy aims of China’s leaders” and attacked the Chinese for developing its own nuclear capability as a “complete apostasy” from the world Communist line.\textsuperscript{37} Soviet opposition to nuclear proliferation continued even after the 1964 fall of Khrushchev and China’s detonation of its first nuclear device.\textsuperscript{38}

The CIA understood one fact to be at the core of Chinese antipathy for the Russians—the latter’s unwillingness to bring its communist allies up to the industrial and military standards of the Soviet Union. They “object to the Soviet leaders’ insistence upon building communism in the USSR first and their concomitant refusal to delay domestic progress in order to bring all members of the Bloc up to the level of their own country.”\textsuperscript{39} Anatoly Dobrynin confided to an American official that the split between Moscow and Peking resulted from “the personal megalomania of Mao.” [The Ambassador] said that “Stalin at his worst had never insisted upon the kind of personal worship which was accorded to Mao.”\textsuperscript{40} But Khrushchev himself would not attack Mao Zedong in front of Western leaders. “Communist states never think of going to war with each other,” he told US diplomats. “It is only Capitalist states that do that.” He defended

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{FRUS, 1961-1963, Soviet Union}, 771.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{FRUS, 1961-1963, Soviet Union}, 422.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, The Soviet Union}, 108.
the Peoples Republic’s right to Taiwan, calling Chang Kai-Shek nothing but a “rebellious general.”

The rift between the Soviets and the Chinese grew wider in the 1961 Communist Party conference in Moscow. Zhou Enlai pointedly laid a wreath at the grave of Josef Stalin. It was inscribed to “the great Marxist-Leninist.” In a carefully worded speech, Zhou did not attack Nikita Khrushchev directly but implied that Soviet policy was insufficiently militant in its support of revolutionary struggles in the Third World. He allowed the Albanians to shoulder the burden of attacking Khrushchev directly, and they complied. Zhou and the Chinese delegation walked out of the conference on October 23, the very day that the Communist Party Congress voted to remove Stalin’s body from the Kremlin mausoleum. In the meanwhile, the Soviets halted deliveries of Russian oil and resolved not to share nuclear technology with Peking. However, the communist parties of China and the Soviet Union continued to attend the same international meetings, leveling thinly veiled criticisms at each other. Most communist parties in the West, including Latin America, reluctantly sided with the Soviets and the Eastern Bloc. The breach would last throughout the rest of the 1960s, affecting China’s relationship with the newest socialist republic in the Caribbean.

Determined to keep a dominant role in the socialist camp as well as in the Kremlin, Khrushchev sensed the importance of Cuba. Internally, the successor to Stalin had created confusion among his communist colleagues with the criticisms of Stalin’s rule and with his plans for economic decentralization. Castro did not declare himself a socialist until the Bay of Pigs

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invasion of 1961 and communist in December 1961, yet Khrushchev looked the other way as Fidel disciplined the stalwarts of the older Cuban communists. Within Fidel’s revolutionary family, many of his former guerrilla leaders still harbored animosity towards the PSP for its inactivity during the fight against Batista. Domestically, the Castro brothers and Che Guevara never allowed the communist old timers much influence over policy and utilized them as compliant bureaucrats. The most ambitious of them, Aníbal Escalante, faced dismissal and humiliation in 1962 and again after the 1967 reduction in Soviet aid. Fidel chose again to demonstrate independence from the USSR, when US “imperialists” with whom Moscow had relations, sent the marines and paratroopers into the Dominican Republic. In 1965, he handpicked the membership of new Cuban Communist Party; ex-guerrilla fighters and not old PSP members dominated the Central Committee. The relationship between Havana and Moscow ebbed and flowed according to domestic and international events. But neither Castro nor the Soviet leadership allowed the connection to break down completely, for the Cuban revolution needed Soviet aid and weapons in order to survive.

Soviet arms certainly arrived in time to contribute to Cuba’s defense in the first big test at the Bay of Pigs. In the spring of 1960, the CIA received the directive of President Eisenhower to prepare an invasion force of Cuban exile combatants in order to overthrow Fidel Castro. “[O]ur hand should not show in anything that is done,” President Dwight D. Eisenhower said. This operation was to appear to be a Cuban affair. CIA operatives subsequently recruited young men


of the Cuban exile community in Miami and sent them for training from US army personnel in Guatemala. President-elect John F. Kennedy learned of the planned invasion shortly before his inauguration and could naught but accept the CIA plans almost in their entirety. After all, in his presidential debates with Vice President Richard Nixon, Kennedy had criticized the Eisenhower-Nixon administration for allowing a “Communist” regime to come to power just 90 miles from Key West, Florida. Moreover, CIA directors assured Kennedy that three quarters of the Cuban population did not support Castro and the mere landing of an invasion force would spark a massive uprising against the “communist” regime. True to his predecessor’s admonition that the “hand of the US must not be shown,” the new president wanted to send a similar message. “First I want to say that there will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces,” he said at a press conference.45

The exile force, Battalion 2506, numbering more than twelve hundred men, landed at Playa Girón on the Bay of Pigs on 17 April 1961. The exile air force’s B-26 bombers had raided Cuban airfields two days before, destroying many of Castro’s fighter aircraft. Mindful of international public opinion, President Kennedy called off the second strike. The few surviving Cuban fighter planes quickly established air superiority over the battlefield, chased the B-26s from the skies, and sank the ships supporting the landing with supplies and ammunition. Cuban émigré forces found themselves stranded on the beachhead, and no popular uprising materialized. Indeed, the poorly-armed revolutionary militias took heavy casualties but prevented the invaders from getting off the beachhead until Fidel himself arrived with units of the FAR. They deployed some of the first Czech weapons such as anti-aircraft and artillery

batteries and T-34 tanks. Twelve hundred members of Brigade 2506 surrendered and spent the next nineteenth months in Cuban prisons.46

Khrushchev seized upon this failure of US policy to embarrass Kennedy when they met a few months later in Vienna. The Soviet premier jabbed his finger in the president’s face and spoke nearly non-stop for a half an hour while Kennedy responded with feeble platitudes. “The President’s decision to launch a landing in Cuba only strengthened the revolutionary forces and Castro’s own position,” said Khrushchev, “because the people of Cuba were afraid that they would get another Bastista [sic] and lose the achievements of the revolution.” He added, “Castro is not a Communist but US policy can make him one.” Khrushchev scolded the American president for supporting the “most reactionary” regimes. “Can six million [Cubans] really be a threat to the mighty US?” the Soviet premier asked rhetorically.47 Yet, Khrushchev himself was the one who miscalculated his advantage over the United States, and he may have wanted a spectacular international victory against imperialism to show up Mao Zedong and those of his own Presidium concerned about the lack of unity in the Communist Bloc.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Instead, it was China that attempted to take advantage of Soviet foreign policy failures in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The plan to place medium range missiles originated in

the Kremlin, a product of Khrushchev’s linking the Cuban Revolution to East-West disagreements over Berlin and Turkey and of his falling prestige at home. Fidel knew that Nikita had been lukewarm about direct arms deliveries between the two countries and asked why the missiles were needed. The Soviets exaggerated the threat of an imminent attack on Cuba by American armed forces, and Havana dutifully sent Raúl and Che to Moscow to finalize the plans. The government of the Peoples Republic initially supported Soviet policy of placing defensive missiles on Cuba soil. In the first days of the resulting US naval blockade, Peking responded bellicosely. On October 23, the government of the PRC issued a statement praising Moscow’s resolve not to withdraw the missiles and supporting “this just stand of the Soviet government.” It urged the Cubans to fight. “US imperialism is, after all, a paper tiger;” said the lead editorial of the Ta Kung Pao newspaper. “Its desperate struggles will intimidate no people fighting for national independence, democracy, and socialism. To deal with US imperialism, the most important thing is to wage a resolute and blow-for-blow struggle against it.” The article referred readers to Mao’s qualification in 1958 about US imperialism being a paper tiger: “this tiger can still bite’ and must therefore be respected tactically.”

However, all Peking support for the Soviets dissolved when Premier Khrushchev made an agreement to withdraw the missiles in exchange for President Kennedy’s promise not to invade Cuba and eventually to remove American missiles from Turkey. In a protest rally in Peking, Peng Zhen of the Politburo referred to Cuba as a later version of the great Chinese

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49 Fursenko and Naftali, Khrushchev’s Cold War, 438-39, 444-45.
revolution: both were “armed revolutions” of the type that Khrushchev was now reluctant to advocate. Peng said that it was an “unshirkable international obligation of the people of the socialist camp” to support “the Cuban people’s struggle against US war provocation.” Peng promised that China would do “all it can in every way” to support the Cubans. Elsewhere, the Chinese press published West German reports that the Soviets had backed down in the Cuban missile crisis, in a “victory for US diplomacy.” The Chinese government hailed Castro’s “Five Conditions,” which Fidel defiantly appended to the Soviet-US agreement. In addition, Fidel said that he would not allow US inspections of Soviet missile sites—which Khrushchev had condoned.

Fidel’s disappointment with Soviet leaders ran deep. He permitted the armed militias to parade through the streets chanting “Nikita, mariquita; lo que se da, no se quita” [Nikita, you sissy, that which you give, do not take back!] The Kremlin dispatched Anastas Mikoyan, the deputy Soviet premier, to assuage the Cuban leader, who informed Mikoyan that the removal of the missiles and the IL-28 bombers constituted a betrayal of the Cuban people. Mikoyan suspected that the Chinese diplomats in Havana were influencing Fidel in this attitude. During a week of contentious talks, Fidel wanted Mikoyan to admit that placement of the rockets and bombers in Cuba had been a mistake on the part of the Soviets. Mikoyan replied that the Soviet Union had “reasons of its own” for placing these weapons in Cuba. Here the CIA writer of the

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51 Castro’s five demands were that the US 1) end the economic blockade, 2) launch no other forms of harassment, 3) stop exile paramilitary activities, 4) end the U-2 flights, and 5) abandon the Guantánamo Naval Station. See James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Tomás Diez Acosta, Octubre de 62: Un paso del holocausto: Una mirada cubana a la crisis de los misiles (Havana: Editora Política, 1999); Daniela Spencer, “The Caribbean Crisis: Catalyst for Soviet Projection in Latin America,” In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spencer (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008): 77-112.
top secret memorandum observed, “The nature of these reasons was not made known to our source.” Suddenly, Castro broke off discussions with Mikoyan, leaving the Soviet deputy premier waiting in the Soviet Embassy for ten days. Finally, Fidel returned and told Mikoyan that he wished to remain a friend of the USSR but reserved the right to find “new friends, who might be more devoted to Cuba.” The Soviet envoy took this to mean the Chinese. Deputy premier Mikoyan concluded that Castro behaved “almost like a mule in his obstinacy.” The Soviets did leave behind some military personnel and the surface to air missiles (SAMs) that they trained the Cubans in operating. American intelligence determined that the Soviets wanted to preserve the Cuban revolution as a “foothold from which to pursue the longer term struggle for Latin America.”

However, Fidel’s “Five Points” did gain favor with other Communists, especially those nations attending the Afro-Asian Solidarity conference in Tanganyika in 1963. Chinese diplomats there informed the Cubans that the Soviet representatives opposed a resolution backing Castro’s position. The Chinese referred to the Soviets as “revisionists” who conducted themselves “like counter-revolutionaries.” Asked one Chinese diplomat, “How can you bring together at one meeting Marxists and revisionists? A revisionist is the same as an imperialist.” He assured the Cubans that Fidel Castro was “the most popular man in China.” Every Chinese school child, the diplomat claimed, had memorized Castro’s statement that “one can do business

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in everything except principles.”\(^{54}\) Even though the Chinese pressed with slogans their advantage over Soviet miscues in the missile crisis, they had few material assets with which to demonstrate their admiration of the Cuban Revolution.

### Castro Chooses Moscow

Cubans were saying after the missile crisis that “Fidel’s head is with Moscow but his heart is with Peking.”\(^ {55}\) The US intelligence community concluded that Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolutionary leadership had more in common with the Chinese than with the Soviet leaders. Both maintained their challenges to the allies of the United States. After the Cuban missile crisis, Cuba increased its subversive activities in Venezuela and sent a small cadre of guerrillas to Argentina.\(^ {56}\) The CIA had calculated in 1963 that three thousand Latin Americans had received guerrilla training from the Cubans, and Che Guevara planned for successful revolutions elsewhere designed to strengthen the Cuban Revolution in its struggle with the United States. This activity in the “export of revolution” increased the friction between the Cubans and the Soviets. Moscow viewed Havana’s aggressive revolutionary stance as a dangerous threat to the security of Latin America’s pro-Soviet communist parties. Schisms broke out in Venezuela and other countries between the cautious communist party old-guard and

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the youthful guerrillas. Still, the Cubans did not spare their criticism of Chinese policies either. Castro faulted the Chinese for not intervening more forcefully in the October missile crises and always asked them for more arms, loans, and trade.\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, the Cubans sought to act as a disinterested broker between the PRC and the USSR and to draw together the two sides at international conferences. The only problem with this short-lived effort: China had little to offer Cuba for its mediation. To secure the revolution, Fidel had to choose between a generous benefactor with different ideas and a parsimonious ideological fellow traveler.

Since the missile crisis, the Kremlin pushed the Cubans to sign an economic assistance pact that would bind the Cubans to the USSR and save this Caribbean ally as a symbol of Soviet leadership in international socialism. Khrushchev wanted to make an economic commitment to preserve Communism 90 miles off the shores of its capitalist rival. For this purpose, he invited Castro to come to the USSR in May 1963 on an extended tour. Soviet leaders patiently listened as Fidel talked about his commitments to “national-liberation” movements. Rodney Arismendi and Mario Monge of the Uruguayan and Bolivian communist parties respectively, sat in on discussions about the future of communism in Latin America. They were two of the more cautious communist leaders in the region; the Chinese would have called them “revisionists.”\textsuperscript{58} Fidel learned accidently about one of the real reasons that Moscow had sent missiles to Cuba—that they might serve as a bargaining chip. No one had revealed to him that part of the Moscow-Washington agreement. As Fidel told it later, during one of their discussions, Khrushchev himself was reading documents to Castro in which the US removal of missiles from Turkey had

\textsuperscript{57}“Opinions of Cuban Government Officials on Internal Situation, Relations with the Soviet Union,” NFS Cuba, Box 52A; “Cuban Attitude Toward the Sino-Soviet Struggle,” NSF Cuba, Box 52A, Kennedy Library.

come up. “How’s that? Repeat that part.” That was when “Nikita realized he had read the paragraph by mistake . . .,” as Fidel later related the scene. Khrushchev gained positive publicity standing next to Fidel at state functions, because the socialist world acclaimed Fidel Castro for his defiance of US aggression. His trip to the Soviet Union lasted five weeks.

Even despite his triumphal visit to Moscow in May 1963, Fidel worried that Moscow might still make a deal with Washington at Cuba’s expense. Soviet minutes of his meetings with Khrushchev indicate that Castro had to bring up the subject of military cooperation. He wanted the Soviet brigade to stay on in Cuba. “It is our opinion that Soviet military personnel located in Cuba are like the celebrated missiles,” Fidel said “So long as they are there, American military circles are convinced that an attack on Cuba would inevitably lead to war with the Soviet Union, which is something that they don’t want and fear.” Nikita replied that the Soviet forces cannot stay forever, especially since there is evidence of a strong guarantee given confidentially by Kennedy not to invade.” Likewise, Khrushchev deflected Castro’s request for 120 of the newest tanks. “The defense of Cuba will not come only with building up Cuban military power,” the Soviet premier said, “but in effective intelligence activity abroad.”

By all accounts, the Kremlin was satisfied with Fidel even though they had to accept his aggressive policies in Latin America. “You mustn’t think of Castro as a little man with a beard from Cuba – a wild demagogue. He is not in the least primitive or unstable,” a Soviet diplomat was heard saying. “He is a very able man; he can be a very dangerous opponent, and is quite

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59 James G. Blight and Philip Brenner, Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba’s Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis (Lanham, MD.: 2002), 64. Also see Carlos Lechuga, In the Eye of the Storm: Castro, Khrushchev, Kenney and the Missile Crisis (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1995), 65-6.

60 Quirk, Fidel Castro, 459-69; Khrushchev, Nikita Khrushchev; 658-62.

61 Fursenko & Naftali, One Hell of a Gamble, 332-34; Lévesque, The USSR and the Cuban Revolution, 92, 96. Fidel’s first trip to the Soviet Union lasted from 27 April to 5 June 1963.
clever and subtle enough to be able successfully to play Moscow off against Peking, and vice versa.” The unnamed diplomat continued by saying, “It is vital for us that Cuba doesn’t slide gradually into the Chinese camp. We have to hold on to Castro tight, and we can only do it with economic aid. This the Chinese cannot give.” The Soviet diplomat revealed that Cuba’s debt to the USSR now amounted to between 200 and 500 million US dollars and that the Russians sold Cuban sugar in Western Europe for hard currency. China could not give this kind of help, he said. Nonetheless, Castro could not be satisfied with only verbal agreements with Khrushchev, particularly following the assassination of the president who had made a verbal agreement to him.

Castro’s second trip to the USSR in January 1964 met the expectations of both Nikita and Fidel. According to the CIA, “Khrushchev again told him to be patient, to continue to strengthen his position in Cuba, to be cautious in sending arms to Latin America, and to avoid exacerbating relations with the United States.” The premier informed the Cuban that the USSR was not in a position, due to the dispute with the Chinese, to engage in direct military action to protect the revolution in the Caribbean. (The CIA had noticed the Soviet troop buildup along its border with China.) But Khrushchev said he would continue his generous military and economic aid to Cuba. Officials at the US State Department surmised that Castro’s visits to Moscow served three major purposes: 1. the Soviets tried to persuade Castro to use caution in fomenting revolution elsewhere in Latin America; 2. they gave Fidel a contract for the delivery of sugar at high fixed prices for the long term, because the Soviets wanted Cuba to concentrate on internal

economic development; and 3. they brought Cuba over to the Moscow side in its dispute with Peking.64

Following these sojourns in Moscow, Castro momentarily stopped attacking US imperialism and signaled for an improvement of US-Cuban relations. But he reiterated that the US would have to accept that Cuba would never abandon Marxism-Leninism in order to improve relations. “There is no way back,” he said. “Cuba will always be with the Soviet Union and the Socialist Camp.”65 In 1964, Cuba was sending five million tons of sugar per year to Eastern Europe and another one million to China, even though shipping through the Panama Canal raised expenses of commerce with the Far East. However, Castro was annoyed at the Czechs, Poles, and East Germans because they were not willing to pay the high prices for Cuban sugar that the Chinese and Soviets paid.66 The military aid proved timely. Exile commando groups backed by the CIA were still attacking coastal ports and military installations, and Cuban militiamen, freshly armed after their service at the Bay of Pigs, were flushing out the remaining counterrevolutionary bands from the island’s hills.67 The rapprochement between Havana and Moscow did not save Khrushchev; the presidium removed him from power in the autumn of 1964. “You insisted that we deploy our missiles on Cuba,” the brief read. “This provoked the deepest crisis, carried the world to the brink of nuclear war, and even frightened terribly the organizer of this very danger. . . . This incident damaged the international prestige of our

64 Secretary of State to All American Diplomatic Posts, 28 Jan 1964, NSF, CF, box 16, LBJ Library.
65 Thomas L. Hughes to Secretary of State, 28 Jul 1964, LBJ, NSF, CF, box 20, LBJ Library.
66 CIA International Intelligence Communication,” 19 Feb 1964. NSF, CF, box 32, LBJ Library.
government, our party, our armed forces, while at the same time helping to raise the authority of the United States.”68

The new trade and military ties between Havana and the Moscow greatly displeased Peking. Despite the fact that Cuba and China still shared identical attitudes about revolutionary action, the Chinese delegates attending the November 1964 Havana Conference of Latin American Communist Parties attacked the hosts for not breaking relations with the Soviets. As the CIA reported, “The pro-Chinese elements also wanted the Cubans to condemn pro-Soviet elements in Latin American communist parties because they refused to advocate armed revolution.”69 Peking had not yet given up on Latin America or its own emphasis on armed resistance.

The Chinese government particularly aimed its efforts at the West Coast of South America. At his own guerrilla warfare course given to a group of Latin American communist revolutionary leaders, Mao offered insights into guerrilla struggle. He stressed the idea of working with the peasant masses, though the urban workers were not to be ignored. He also prescribed a program of agricultural reform. The CIA report on this training said that the Chinese instructors complimented the Peruvian Communist leaders on their guerrilla struggle. They also suggested that pro-Chinese leaders should not break with the mainline communist parties in Latin American countries but maintain party unity and work to compete with the pro-Soviet factions for leadership positions. Chairman Mao and others also warned that the US might intervene militarily in communist-led rebellions in Latin America. Therefore, the Latin Americans frequently asked for arms. “It is impossible to send arms to support any armed revolt

in Latin America, primarily because we lack a base of operations and support,” their instructors replied. “Without a base it is impossible to send sufficient arms to help.” They hoped that the Peruvian guerrillas would eventually provide that base. But clearly, the Chinese did not see Cuba or the Caribbean as the Chinese base of operations in the Western Hemisphere. One CIA report concluded that “the Chinese gave the impression that they had no confidence in Cuba as a base for Chinese-supported operations in Latin America.”

Peking proved its commitment to armed revolution in Latin America by lending support to selected “Maoist” groups in Peru. The CIA was monitoring Chinese assistance to the Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionario (MIR) and other groups. One report indicated that the MIR leader, Luis de la Puente Uceda, thought that “conditions for revolution [in Peru were] now excellent both politically and operationally” and wanted to begin operations in the Andes during the rainy season at the end of April 1964. De la Puente told his supporters that he had received a letter from Mao Zedong, asking for the illusive unity of the left in Peru. The pro-China faction of Peru’s Communist Party and certain youth groups supported the MIR as requested, but pro-Soviet Peruvian communists did not join in. Arms arrived at the MIR base in the Andes by way of Manaus, Brazil, and in station wagons traveling from Chile. In the meanwhile, eight miristas left for training in North Korea, and twenty more were to go to China for guerrilla instruction. None of them were to travel through Moscow which, De la Puente suspected, was working with the US to identify Latin American guerrilla trainees. The MIR claimed to have $3 million compliments of the Peking, with promises of $40 million more. Despite China’s assistance, De

la Puente and his comrades were defeated by Peruvian armed forces in October of 1965. US military trainers assisted the Peruvian army. Mao was correct: the “paper tiger” could still bite.

Chinese Hostility, Soviet-Cuban Tension

The CIA reported that the Western Hemisphere had become a Sino-Soviet battleground of “major importance,” even though China’s presence was comparatively small. Peking’s call for revolutionary struggle appealed to dissident activists eager to wrest power from the Moscow-oriented Old Guard that dominated the Communist parties in the hemisphere. These dissidents looked both to Havana and to Peking in their arguments against party leaders. There were divisions in the parties in many countries between pro-Chinese factions and the dominant pro-Soviet leadership. The Chinese had increased its financial backing and training of dissidents. The Chinese had only one embassy in Latin America, in Havana, and its trade with Cuba amounted nearly to $200 million, twice the amount of any other American republic. Chinese sold rice, medicines, and industrial goods to Cuba in exchange for sugar. Moreover, 150 Chinese advisers —mainly agricultural technicians— were working in Cuba. But Cuba’s dependence on Soviet trade and arms cooled the Chinese relationship. The 1964 meeting in Havana, arranged by Moscow, appeared to be a bid to isolate the pro-Chinese factions of the parties. The Chinese began thereafter equated the Cuban leaders as “revisionists.”


Cuba could not rely solely on ideological kinship with the Chinese; trade and military assistance drew Castro into the Soviet camp. Thus it was that Chinese leaders began to distance themselves from Cuba following the Havana meeting for Latin American communist parties in November 1964. At the conclusion of this meeting, a delegation of Latin American communists traveled to Peking to brief Chinese leaders. They met with a cool reception. Party leaders refused to accept the resolutions of the Havana Conference, which they considered “revisionist.” Mao Zedong was particularly furious with the Latin American conferees, according to CIA informants. “He reminded his listeners that 650 million Chinese are behind the Chinese Communist Party. . . .” the report said. “In reply to a remark by the Uruguayan delegate, Mao demanded to know how many people the Uruguayan communist party represented.” (The CIA estimate was 4,000 members.) When Cuba’s pro-Moscow communist leader Carlos Rafael Rodríguez attempted to interrupt him, Mao retorted that there were three demons in the world: imperialism, the atomic bomb, and revisionism. Mao said, “Fidel Castro was still afraid of the first two.” The Chinese leader was insinuating that Fidel followed Russian revisionism. Rodríguez shouted back that Cuba did not fear imperialism or the bomb and “was absolutely independent of everybody and uninvolved in any disputes.”

By the time that Che Guevara relinquished his economic positions in Cuba and prepared for his final diplomatic missions, his own thinking had soured on both the Soviet and Chinese camps. He seemed to devote these final efforts to marginalizing Moscow and Peking from the affairs of the anti-imperialist movement in the Developing World except as unreliable suppliers of military and economic aid. In his mind, the direction of revolutionary activities was to be the

74 CIA, “Visit to Peking of Latin American Leaders following the November Conference in Havana,” 24 Mar 1965, NSF CF, Box 31, LBJ Library.
exclusive responsibility of the anti-imperialist forces in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Che Guevara departed from Cuba on December 18, 1964 for an extended trip through Africa and Asia. As he traveled, his speeches drew parallels between African guerrilla movements and that of Castro’s in the Sierra Maestra and also linked the “progressive revolutionary” states of Africa with the Cuban Revolution. All the struggles of Africans were against “neocolonialism,” he said, and Cuba should be their natural ally rather than the USSR or the PRC. Che did not explicitly offer Cuban arms or economic aid to the African liberation movements, but he did provide Angolan insurgents with Cuban training scholarships in military tactics and nursing and refugee care. Nevertheless, both the USSR and China continued to send arms to its allied states in Africa, some of which the CIA traced through Cuba.

However, Che Guevara still wished to repair the Sino-Soviet rift and visited China for the second time in February 1965. Chairman of the Communist Party Mao Zedong refused to meet with him. Instead, Che faced the disapproval of the chairman of the government, Liu Shaoqi, who scolded him for Cuba’s entry into the camp of the Soviet revisionists. Liu claimed that the Peoples Republic of China had been generous in helping Cubans with aid and support. “However, we now realize,” said Liu, “that the Cubans are and have been actually led by the Soviets and are in fact in the revisionist camp.” Che shot back with criticism of the Chinese for the intransigent positions they had taken at the Latin American Communist Party Conference in Havana. “The fourth interview ended with a violent exchange between Liu and Che, who announced that there was nothing to be gained by continuing the conversations,” the CIA

75 Directorate of Intelligence, “Weekly Cuban Summary,” 3 Feb 1965, NSF, CF, box 36, LBJ Library. One CIA report noted that the Cuban ship engaged in the sugar trade, the Sierra Maestra, would return from China with shipments of armaments. This same vessel then sailed with military equipment to Oran, Algeria, where Cuban military instructors were already on site. CIA, “Weekly Cuban Summary,” 17 Feb 1965, NSF, CF, box 36, LBJ Library. Jon Lee Anderson, Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 610-11.
reported. Che departed from China earlier than expected.\(^76\) Later, Guevara would admit to Fidel Castro that the Chinese were “useless to Cuba” as a substitute for the USSR.\(^77\)

Che Guevara never broke openly with Fidel and Raúl Castro despite his criticism of the Soviet Union as well as of the Chinese. But the fact is that by the mid-1960s Raúl, as head of the armed forces, had become the leading proponent of a Soviet alliance. He had visited the Soviet Union on several occasions, meeting with the Soviet defense minister on arms deals and the training of Cuban military and intelligence personnel.\(^78\) Observed Carlos Franqui, editor of the newspaper Revolución, “Che and Raúl were good friends in the early days of the [revolutionary] war, but they drifted apart during the times of heavy Party politics, when Che began to criticize the Soviet system and the Czechs, who had sold us the junk they couldn’t use.”\(^79\) Che’s last public speech in Algiers in January 1965 proved inflammatory. He accused the socialist bloc of behaving like imperialists in its trade deals with Latin America and Africa and also in its diplomatic relations with the United States at a time of the Vietnam War. No one could mistake Che’s inference when he said, “The socialist countries have the moral duty to put an end to their tacit complicity with the exploiting countries of the West.”\(^80\) To many observers, Che appeared to be leveling his criticism toward the Soviet Union.

It was becoming clear that Che’s forthright expressions of distaste for Soviet party bosses exasperated Fidel, who after all had a nation to govern. On the return of Che from his last

\(^77\) I. J. M. Sutherland to William G. Bowdler, 20 Apr 1965, NSF, CF, box 18, LBJ Library.
\(^78\) Latell, After Fidel, 136; Suárez, Cuba, 94, 159.
\(^79\) Franqui, Family Portrait with Fidel, 219.
diplomatic mission to Algiers, a grim-faced Castro met him at the airport together with the usual retinue of high government officials and Che’s wife, Aleida March. Che’s domestic nemesis, the old communist Carlos Rafael Rodriguez was also present. Castro immediately whisked his Argentine compañero into an office, where Raúl joined them. They had a long, frank discussion. At the end, everyone agreed that Che would pursue his activist agenda in Africa, while Fidel and Raúl pursued their duties in preserving the Cuban Revolution. Just days after Che’s return from Algiers, Raúl flew to Moscow to attend a communist party meeting that the Chinese delegation was boycotting; his attendance signaled that the Cubans were on the side of the Soviets. Nonetheless, the Castro brothers also supported Che’s African mission with their best Afro-Cuban soldiers.

Then one of the most photographed and newsworthy personalities of the 1960s, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, dropped out of sight in March of 1965. No one knew where he was or even whether he was alive or dead. The FBI advised the administration of President Lyndon Baines Johnson that “perhaps” Fidel had shot Che in the midst of a heated argument. CIA agents

81 According to one Argentine journalist who interviewed the former guards of Che and Fidel, the three spoke loudly enough to be heard outside the room. Raúl accused Che of being a Trotskyist, and the Argentine roared back, “Eres un estúpido, eres un estúpido.” Fidel responded that Che demonstrated a failure of tact in his comments about the Soviet Union, Cuba’s major ally against the bloqueo yanki and the underwriter of Cuba’s economic and defense capabilities. Cuba cannot fight against both the US and the USSR, said Fidel. See Pacho O’Donnell, Che: La vida por un mundo mejor (Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2004), 235-37. Another of Che’s biographer, Jon Lee Anderson, attests to the seriousness of the meeting; he says that Fidel accepted Che’s views on the USSR but suggested that Che depart for the training mission to the Congo as soon as possible so as not to antagonize Cuba’s principal benefactor. Anderson, Che Guevara, 626-27

82 Che and Fidel’s biographers note March 1965 as the decisive moment of the Argentinean’s departure from the Revolution. See Hugo Gambini, El Che Guevara: La biografía (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2004), 287-89; Castañeda, Compañero, 296-300; Domínguez, To Make A World Safe for Revolution, 68-69; Quirk, Fidel Castro, 522-23; Szulc, Fidel, 670. Says Fidel, “[Che] had no conflicts with the Soviets, but it’s obvious that he was closer . . . to China, or more sympathetic to that country.” Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, Fidel Castro: My Life, A Spoken Autobiography, trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York: Scribner, 2006), 292.
confided that Guevara may be in a Soviet psychological hospital after suffering a mental breakdown. Of course, Fidel knew but never revealed Che’s whereabouts.

In fact, the Argentinean revolutionary had organized and led a team of Cuban advisers into the Eastern Congo in support of an uprising of Laurent Kabila’s rebel forces. Both China and the USSR had stockpiled arms in friendly African countries, Tanzania, Ghana, Egypt, and Algeria, and Che’s group availed itself of several tons of arms and supplies from these stocks. In a way, Chinese generosity towards Africa had spurred the Soviets to respond with comparable supplies. “Boats keep arriving with plenty of high quality weapons,” Che wrote about the Congo. “[I]t was pitiful to see how they squandered the resources of friendly countries. . . .” However, neither power could prevent Kabila’s forces from being routed by CIA-supported mercenaries. Guevara went into hiding at Cuban embassy in Tanzania in order to write a lengthy report to Fidel about the African debacle. “This is the history of a failure,” his report began. During his hiatus from public scrutiny, Che Guevara was engaging in revolutionary struggles of the type that the Chinese would have approved and the Soviets would have criticized as “adventurous.”

83 Che Guevara and the FBI: The US Political Police Dossier on the Latin American Revolutionary, edited by Michael Ratner and Michael Steven Smith (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1997), 131; Philip Agee, Inside the Company: CIA Diary (New York: Stonehill, 1975), 437-38. One of Che’s closest associates in the export of revolution, Manuel Piñeiro of the Interior Ministry, claimed that Guevara did not break with the Soviets or with the Chinese. But the story spread that Fidel shot Che and had him buried secretly. “That’s how one of the most incredible tall tales of all time was created,” he wrote. Manuel Piñeiro, Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolutionary Movements, ed. by Luis Suárez Salazar, trans. by Mary Todd (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2001), 44.


The Tricontinental Conference that convened in Havana in January 1966 let loose another series of squabbles stemming from the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Chinese delegates accused Moscow for being soft on imperialism, allowing the US to transfer troops from West Germany for service in Vietnam. The Soviet members mobilized the majority of delegates to overturn a Chinese resolution encouraging Latin American armed struggle. The Cubans too were drawn into the dispute. Fidel reacted strongly to China’s sudden reduction in the delivery of rice supplies. He announced that the Chinese move necessitated the reduction of Cuban rice rations by 50 percent. Fidel equated the reduced rice shipments as China having joined the US economic blockade. “We do not blame the Chinese government exclusively for the reduction of this ration,” Fidel said. Cubans should also blame themselves “for having believed in the international spirit of the Chinese government.”86 The Sino-Soviet rift even threatened the main business of the conference: the establishment of a solidarity organization unifying the anti-imperialist forces of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Soviets had wanted the headquarters of the new Tricontinental Organization to be in Cairo, but the Chinese adamantly opposed the idea because the Egyptians appeared to be too subservient to the Soviets. Backed by Latin American delegates, the Chinese succeeded in establishing temporary leadership in Havana. The Soviets suffered another blow when the delegates did not support the policy of “peaceful coexistence” and expressed strong support for the “anti-imperialist” struggle in Vietnam.87

87 Thomas L. Hughes, “The Tri-Continent Conference at Havana: A Preliminary Assessment,” n.d., NSF, CF, box 18, LBJ Library. Also see D. Bruce Jackson, Castro, the Kremlin, and Communism in Latin America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), Chapter VI.
Neither the Soviets, nor the Chinese, nor Castro himself could claim a clear victory at the Tricontinental Conference. The wrangling continued.

But the Peoples Republic clearly was losing friends. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that began in 1966 served as the catalyst, as internal party struggles between the left and right mobilized the Red Guards movement, discredited the national and provincial bureaucracies, involved the Peoples Liberation Army in political disputes, and setback economic recovery. Liu and Peng died, as did the army commander Lin Piao. Deng Xiaoping underwent years of internal exile, and Zhou was one of the few moderates to survive. Mao strengthened his domestic rule and then turned on the so-called “Gang of Four,” including his wife Jiang Qing, who had aided him in reestablishing his authority. He then used the army to suppress the Red Guards. As the CIA concluded, the Cultural Revolution “contributed to China’s growing isolation in the world.”

Certainly, the export of arms, foreign trade, and funding of foreign revolutionary movements dried up.

Meanwhile, between March of 1965 and October of 1967, the international press did not catch a glimpse of Che Guevara. He remained in seclusion when he finally returned to Cuba from Africa. With the assistance of Fidel Castro and Cuban intelligence agencies, Che began to train a small band of Cubans and assorted other Latin Americans for an armed uprising to carry on the revolution in Bolivia. “[T]he cordillera of the Andes will be the Sierra Maestra of Latin America,” he quoted Fidel as saying. Che and his men arrived in Bolivia in October 1966. On

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89 Guevara, Guerilla Warfare, 153. Historians point out that Bolivia had already had its “National Revolution” in 1952. Ironically, young Ernesto Guevara had been there briefly as a witness. Ernesto Che Guevara, Otra vez: El diario inédito del segundo viaje por América Latina (1953-1956) (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000); José M. Gordillo, Campesinos revolucionarios en Bolivia: Identidad, territorio y sexualidad
only three occasions did the world hear from Guevara in the last two and one-half years of his life. Fidel read Che’s moving farewell note at a mass rally in Havana while his Argentine-born comrade was engaged in the guerrilla training mission in Africa. The second message from Che’s pen arrived in the 1967 publication of the *Tricontinental* journal, in which he praised the North Vietnamese struggle against US imperialism and urged his colleagues to create “two, three, many Vietnams” in order to stretch thin American military power. This was Maoist sentiment, expressed at the precise time that the Soviet Union continued diplomatic and trade relations with the “imperialist aggressors” and while Vietnamese revolutionaries were fighting the American invaders.

Moreover, as a guerrilla commander in Bolivia, Che sought to recruit and train an international corps of both pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese communists. Several Peruvian revolutionaries joined his group, as did a militant French journalist and an Argentine artist and communist. Among his Bolivian recruits, he accepted volunteers from the pro-Moscow Communist Party as well as from a Maoist splinter group connected to the militant tin miner’s unions. Veteran guerrilla fighters from Cuba’s revolutionary war formed the leadership and core of the group. However, the Bolivian Communist Party, led by Mario Monje (who had traveled with Castro in the Soviet Union in 1963), ended recruitment efforts once Monje realized that he had been duped into believing that Che had really wanted to form a guerrilla band to invade his home country of Argentina. In a dramatic New Years day meeting in 1967, Monje demanded to be the military commander of the group while it operated in Bolivia. Not wanting to make the

same mistakes of his recent Africa debacle, Che Guevara claimed that only he had the revolutionary experience to lead the uprising. Monje turned to the Bolivian recruits and said, “You will die heroically, but you do not have even the slightest chance of winning.” To the end, Che Guevara had been committed to revolutionary action as well as to bridging the differences between the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese communists in order to accomplish the Latin American revolution.

Not every communist statesman viewed the Guevara example as laudatory. Leonid Brezhnev, the new Soviet premier, voiced annoyance that Che and Cuban guerrillas were operating in Bolivia and that Moscow had not been consulted about the Havana’s decision to place him there. Russian diplomats conveyed these objections to Fidel. It violated the understanding between the communist parties of Latin America, they said, and it provoked the United States government. Brezhnev also implied that the Soviet Union might not come to its aid if the US attacked Cuba. In this tense atmosphere in Soviet-Cuban relations, Aleksey Kosygin traveled to the United States in order to confer with President Johnson in June 1967. Johnson brought up the subject of Cuba. Although the president did not mention Che specifically, he did tell Kosygin that the US had evidence of “Cuba’s encouragement of guerilla operations in seven Latin American countries,” which was dangerous to peace. Eastern Bloc arms were uncovered and eight Cubans captured in Venezuela. The Soviet envoy seemed embarrassed, Johnson later confided to Eisenhower. Kosygin acted “like he was a little upset

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90 Inti Peredo, Mi campaña con el Che (Mexico City: Editorial Punto y Coma, 1987), 232. Also see Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Diario del Che en Bolivia (Barcelona: Ediciones Metropolitana, 1994), 48-49; Félix I. Rodriguez and John Weisman, Shadow Warrior (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 48-49.

91 Blight and Brenner, Sad and Luminous Days, 122.
Kosygin stopped in Havana on his return to Moscow and reiterated Soviet objections to Cuba’s support for guerrilla groups such as Che’s in Bolivia. “Fidel expressed strong criticism of the Soviet Union for going too far in making concessions to imperialism in its efforts to foster détente,” admitted one Soviet diplomat. Castro would not apologize for Cuba’s attempts to foster revolution abroad.

Moscow had had enough. The Kremlin decided to get tough with Fidel, particularly now that the Chinese were shutting out the world during the Cultural Revolution and could not help the Cubans. The Soviet Union reduced the supplies of low-priced oil along with other aid that it delivered to Havana, and the Cuba economy began to sputter. Still, Castro did not relent and responded that Cuba should be able to chart its own course free from outside interference.

At this same moment, the career of the Cuban Revolution’s most celebrated “leftist” ideologue was rapidly coming to an end. In April of 1967, Bolivian police had captured one of Che Guevara’s accomplices, the radical French journalist, Regis Debray. He revealed for the first time in more than two years that Che was indeed alive. Bolivian troopers discovered one of Guevara’s hideouts, finding incriminating documents and photographs. This exposure led to several important developments that sealed the doom of Che’s guerrillas. First, Bolivian politicians used the specter of a “foreign invasion” by an Argentine commander and Cuban soldiers in order to foster a nationalist reaction in the zone of combat. Not one Bolivian peasant joined Che’s revolution. Second, the United States sent in military equipment and trainers.

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93 Blight and Brenner, Sad and Luminous Days, 125.
Special Forces counterinsurgency instructors arrived to help create an elite battalion of Bolivian rangers, one unit of which finally captured Che Guevara in October 1967. He was executed shortly thereafter.

Why is the fate of this Argentinean revolutionary important to the relationship between the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba? Here is the thing. The rigid ideologue of the Cuban revolution, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, had to give way so that the pragmatic revolutionary, Fidel Castro Ruz, could make the inevitable decision to preserve the Cuban Revolution at home by confirming its military and economic alliance with the Soviet Union rather than the Peoples Republic of China. The Kremlin would never have continued its generosity toward Cuba if Fidel had sided ideologically with the Chinese. And the latter had little to offer in exchange for Castro’s denouncement of the Soviet Union—particularly after the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, the historian might conclude that the Sino-Soviet Rift of the 1960s had presented to the fledgling socialist republic a timely opportunity. The dispute broke into the public during Cuba’s revolutionary infancy, when international condemnation and internal opposition presented the revolutionaries with the greatest danger of being overthrown. They needed allies with deep pockets and a willingness to spend. The timing could not have been better for young revolutionaries located so far from the centers of international communism. In 1959, China was just emerging from the internal turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and prepared

95 On Guevara in Bolivia, see Henry Butterfield Ryan, The Fall of Che Guevara: A Story of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Benigno (Dariel Alarcón Ramírez), Memorias de un soldado cubano: Vida y muerte de la Revolución (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1997).

96 Says Daniela Spencer, “The tensions between the two countries were reduced as a result of the eliminations of [Che’s] guerrillas.” Spencer, “The Caribbean Crisis,” 105.
itself to reenter international diplomacy. Thus Che Guevara could fly from Moscow to Peking and back again to Moscow early in 1961 in order to pry economic concessions from two communist powers willing and motivated to outdo each other in cultivating socialist allies.

By 1966, when the Cuban Revolution had become firmly established, the Chinese rulers re-entered another period of internal turmoil, the Cultural Revolution, during which Peking ended its efforts to make friends through trade and diplomacy. By this time, the Cubans no longer needed Russian artillerymen. This Caribbean island’s revolutionary army and militia forces were well trained, indoctrinated, and armed. The people were mobilized and the redistributive economy, well in place. The crises of invasion and naval blockade had passed, and the internal and external counterrevolutionaries had lost CIA-support and had given up. The Revolution’s class enemies had long since departed for exile in Miami. Moreover, Cuba’s primary aggressor, the United States, was moving the site of its anti-communist crusade from the Caribbean Basin to Southeast Asia. As it departed, the US left in place an economic blockade of Cuba that involved nearly every Latin American country save Mexico. But Havana survived with the economic assistance of the Soviet Union. The Cuban Revolution had established a modicum of security without giving up its cherished independent path.

In August 1968, therefore, Cuban citizens expected that Fidel would revert to his independent tendencies in his relations with the Soviet Union by condemning its invasion of Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring movement. But Castro turned the tables. Czech leaders blundered in their reform measures and failed “to maintain contact with the masses,” he said. Furthermore, the Czechs were negotiating loans with the imperialist powers and getting involved with the CIA. “[W]e were convinced that the Czechoslovak regime was heading
toward capitalism and was inexorably heading toward imperialism." Fidel Castro sided with the USSR but with a logic that would have pleased Che Guevara.

These economic and military relationships embedded in the Havana-Moscow alliance since the 1968 endured until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. The Soviets restored full economic trade after Castro’s pronouncements on Czechoslovakia. This is not to say that the bargain was ever easy, for the Soviets paid dearly for its claim on the only socialist republic in the Western Hemisphere. That is to say, they sold petroleum cheaply and bought sugar at high prices and they subsidized the export of arms and technology to Cuba. As an indulgent parent might ignore the occasional poor behavior of a beloved but willful child, the Kremlin grew accustomed to tolerating Havana’s more aggressive foreign policies in Latin America and Africa. The Cubans, for their part, paid dearly when the Communist regime in Moscow crumbled in 1992. The economy has yet to recover from the loss of largess from so generous a patron.

97 Blight and Brenner, Sad and Luminous Days, 219. Also see Quirk, Fidel Castro, 598-99; Duncan, The Soviet Union, 76-79; Pavlov, Soviet-Cuban Alliance, 90-94.

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In June 1966, in the midst of yet another economic crisis, the Argentine military seized control of the country, heralding their fifth coup d’état of the century as “La Revolución Argentina.” Under the leadership of General Juan Carlos Onganía, the military government asserted that communism threatened Argentina’s future, and that social, political, and economic stability could only occur with its eradication. In their speeches, the generals not only mentioned the need to combat the spread of leftist ideology, but also emphasized an immediate need to deal with stagnant economic growth, high inflation, fiscal irresponsibility, depleted national savings, and declining foreign investments. However, during the first six months, the new government expended a tremendous amount of energy trying to save Argentina from moral degradation, and it linked these efforts to its anti-communist position. In particular, Gen. Onganía and his cabinet utilized the police to cleanse the supposed decadence of Argentina’s middle-class youth through a morality campaign, clamp down on communism in the national universities, and implement anti-communist and censorship legislation, even before dealing with economic problems.

With a consensus among the military and Gen. Onganía’s civilian cabinet members that the failing economy warranted immediate action, why did the new government worry so much about morality and link its culture campaigns to the eradication of communism? Based on the officers’ speeches, the military’s revolutionary pamphlets, the writings of Catholic Nationalists, anti-communist and censorship legislation, and Argentine and U.S. newspapers, this paper demonstrates that ultra-conservative Catholic Nationalist theologians shaped the officers own definition of communism and justifications for their anti-communist campaign, even before they established a clear plan for economic stabilization. The anti-communist rhetoric and actions of authoritative and conservative...
Catholic-minded officers targeted the “immorality” of the modern youth because they believed the internal threat of communism had degraded the country’s traditional Catholic values. Based on the theological persuasions of Catholic Nationalist thinkers, the generals believed that by constructing a moral and spiritual culture they could shield Argentina’s youth from further exposure to leftist ideology and mold them into the future conservative and Catholic leadership.

The Military’s Economic Promises and Anti-Communist Resolve

During the months leading up to the coup d’état on the 29th of June 1966, the military concluded Argentina’s many problems could only be solved through revolutionary change dictated through three stages: economic, political and social. They articulated the country’s quagmire of problems, the previous administration’s failure to solve them, and their course of action in various printed pamphlets and speeches presented to the public after the coup. The military generals’ discourse reveals not only what they believed in and valued, but also illuminates how they planned to legitimize their seizure of power from a democratically elected president and their subsequent actions. More importantly, their discourse exhibits the particularly problematic issues that they aimed to address.

Although various officers and cabinet members under Onganía weighed the importance of the three stages of the Argentine Revolution differently, all agreed that Argentina’s economic problems warranted immediate action and they needed to address the presence and spread of leftist ideology. In the Directive for the Planning and Action of the Government, the officers stated that the previous economic policies had resulted in
a “slow and distorted economic development...aggravated by an accelerating inflation which has prevented savings and capital investment.”¹ In addition, on the first page of the Acts of the Revolution, the officers argued that the myriad of problems the nation faced, including the failing economy, “has created favorable conditions for a subtle and aggressive Marxist penetration in all areas of national life...that puts the nation in danger of falling before the advance of collective totalitarianism.”² Therefore, they promised the nation that the new military government would “neutralize all types of extremism, especially communism,”³ and the officers would work to “eliminate the deep-rooted causes of the present economic stagnation.”⁴ Such discourse pleased high officials in Washington focused on preventing the spread of international communism in the Western Hemisphere through economic support and development with programs such as the Alliance for Progress.

One month before the coup, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had already provided President Johnson and other officials in Washington insights to the officers’ intentions upon seizing control of the country. During a private meeting between Argentine officers and the CIA, one of the generals stated that there was no alternative to a military coup “because of the government’s complete failure to solve the economic problems facing the country...[and] its failure to combat increased communist subversion and infiltration.”⁵ The CIA quickly reported to Washington some of the key objectives for their new government: “to restore economic stability, to neutralize communist activities, to make Argentina an active rather than a passive ally of the Western Countries, and to restore the confidence of foreign investors and broaden and strengthen relations with the U.S.”⁶ Based on what the generals told the CIA during that meeting
and their promises to the nation after the coup, U.S. officials believed Argentina’s new government shared a common interest to immediately implementing reform measures to establish economic growth and prosperity—progress that in theory would provide a means to combat international communism by diminishing the popularity for a Socialist model.

Yet, despite the government’s rhetoric to justify their coup in June 1966 with promises of economic reform, less clear in their discourse was a concise plan on how to stabilize the economy. During the first six months in office, inter-cabinet fighting over a concise plan for reform deterred the military government from addressing the countries problems. In a memorandum, the CIA reported their disappointment. “It is clear that the Onganía government assumed office with no clear idea how to go about stabilizing and modernizing the economy as promised, and its initial months were spent trying to decide upon the most effective path to follow.” They noted that by the end of 1966 “little had been accomplished in the economic field due to differences of how to carry out economic reforms. Various gradualists [had] fought with advocates of shock methods, developmentalists with monetarists, and advocates of a free market system with supporters of greater government involvement.”

Apparently, although the military promised economic reform, it did not weigh as heavily on the officers’ minds as other reform measures and efforts to combat leftist ideology.

Evident from their discourse, economic growth and stability constituted an important component of the officers’ reform efforts during their tenure in office. However, other promises for reform besides economic growth outlined in their initial speeches and printed pamphlets provide important clues to the military’s primary
concerns and what they would direct their initial reform efforts to. Although the members of the cabinet could not agree on a plan for economic reform, all believed that leftist ideologies and modernization had led to the nation’s loss of moral or spiritual convictions, especially among the youth. Targeting the youth, Gen. Onganía and his cabinet members believed they could directly confront and eliminate leftist elements, and at the same time restore the nation’s morals based on Catholic principles—what they believed constituted Argentina’s historical tradition. The administrations immediate focus on combating communism and immorality directly through social and cultural reforms indicate that the Argentine generals did not share the same view as U.S. officials of the threat of communism and the most effective measures to eliminate is presence.

A closer look at the discourse of the new government reveals that a central goal of the military’s Revolution would involve restoring a spiritual community built on traditional Catholic mores and values. Following similar worldwide developments, Argentina had passed through a stage of modernization and cultural radicalization during the 1960s. In the minds of many conservative officers, the new cultural experiments that challenged traditional norms had “caused the disruption of the spiritual unity of the Argentine people, generalized alienation and skepticism, apathy and loss of National feeling.”9 Several parts of the speeches and published goals of the Argentine generals concentrated mainly on ethical issues: the need for a stronger sense of cultural coherence, national unity, and moral community. The generals stated a key goal would be to “consolidate our spiritual and moral values.” They would strive for a “spiritual community among the population.”10 This discourse focused on making the people
“believe” again, to create a new moral consensus around old values and restore Argentines’ spiritual unity.

Under their plan detailing their actions during the first year, the administration articulated goals to construct a national moral order based on Catholic traditions. Gen. Onganía and his cabinet would strive for the “attainment of a wide understanding and spiritual community among the population.”11 National spiritual unity would reorient Argentine culture according to its Catholic values. The section of the Acts of the Revolution related to foreign policy reveals the importance of this new spiritual community. The administration promised, “to maintain firmly national sovereignty, defending our territorial integrity, spiritual values, style of life and great moral ends that form the essence of nationality.”12 In the minds of the generals, the aspects of national sovereignty that necessitated their defense were spiritual values and ethical expression.

According to the general’s discourse, they would dedicate at least the first year to the restoration of a moral order and spiritual community to preserve what they believed defined Argentina’s true culture. However, included in specific plans for reform during the second year of the Argentine Revolution, the administration wrote that if necessary, they would even “establish legislation facilitating the spiritual unity and the moral consolidation of the population.”13 The military’s struggle to reform culture and create a Catholic and moral community would continue throughout the military’s tenure in office, regardless of its action to stabilize the economy. Not only did the generals lace their political goals with religious rhetoric, they also intertwined such discourse with their plans to combat the spread of communism.
After seizing power, the military government asserted that communism threatened Argentina’s future because it challenged Argentina’s traditional values and Catholic way of life. During the 1950s and 1960s, they argued the country had witnessed “the development of a dangerous ideological infiltration in its most subtle forms that is…substantially altering the essence of our traditional and Christian system of life.” As defenders of Western and Christian society, the military was horrified by the elements that challenged society’s traditional values, such as the spread of leftist ideology, new sexual freedoms and avant-garde art. As Argentine historian Luis Alberto Romero has noted, the youth’s acceptance of Marxism and the modern cultural expressions “seemed merely different aspects of the same assault on western and Christian values,” and had contributed to degraded cultural expressions. The military must eliminate communism, argued Gen. Onganía in a speech to the nation, for it “corrupts youth with a foreign ideology that is destructive of our purest spiritual values.” Therefore, Gen. Ongania promised, “to neutralize all types of extremism, especially communism that is opposed to the spiritual union of the population and is alienated from the Argentine historical and cultural heritage.” Thus, the military intertwined anti-communist discourse with concerns related to the nation’s, and specifically the youth’s, lack of spiritual values and morals.

The general’s rhetoric indicated that first they believed that leftist ideologies had contributed to degrading society’s spirituality and moral values, thus warranting a fierce anti-communist battle. Second, part of combating communism included restructuring society to reflect its Catholic values. By constructing a moral culture, the generals believed they could shield society, especially young people, from the advance of
communist infiltration. To understand the military’s discourse it is necessary to understand the origins of their religious inspired anti-communist position.

**Catholic Nationalist Influences and the Military’s Anti-communist Ideology**

Historian Mark Osiel has analyzed why the two final dictatorships, the Argentine Revolution (1966-1973) and the final dictatorship (1976-1983) wove religious rhetoric and programs of cultural reform with measures to root-out communist influences. He points out that both dictatorships referred to their adversaries as “communists” or “Marxist”, engendered by Soviet influence in the hemisphere. However, their view of the communist threat different from U.S. policy makers, evident by the fact that trade with the Soviet Union sharply increased during the Argentine Revolution and continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s—demonstrated by Aldo César Vacs’ analysis of trade relations between the two countries. The problem in understanding the officers’ anti-communist discourse and methods to curb its influences in Argentine stems from the fact that U.S. scholars have mistakenly interpreted “communism” voiced by the generals. “It is these officers’ conception of the threat their country faced, not our own that is pertinent in making sense of their behavior,” argues Osiel. Our interpretation and conception of communism is not only mislabeling, but often results in attaching the base of the general’s ideology to influences from U.S. training or socio-political theorists.

Osiel’s warnings are important when considering the dialogue between the officers of the Argentine Revolution and U.S. diplomats and Central Intelligence agents before and after their coup. Both spoke a similar rhetoric, emphasizing their anti-communist position and agreement to struggle for the elimination of communist
influences from the Western Hemisphere. Yet, differences in definitions of “communism” and reasons for its curtailment between the two parties contributed to a misinterpretation of an ostensibly similar dialogue. Whereas, CIA agents and diplomats wired hopeful telegraphs home that the future leaders would combat communism through economic growth, the officers themselves may have simply used such rhetoric to appeal to U.S. policymakers with the hope of securing legitimacy and to be viewed as worthy allies. In their own minds, their anti-communist ideology directly coincided with their religious orientation. Thus, in order to understand the military’s anti-communist position and actions, it is also vital to understand to origins of Catholic Nationalist theology and its influences in shaping the military’s political ideology.

During the years leading up to the Argentine Revolution, Catholic Nationalists based their theology on the ideas on the Nationalist movement already present in Argentina. Historian David Rock has argued that near the end of the nineteenth century, in reaction to the Liberal party’s anticlerical movements, the Catholic Church bridged the anti-liberal sentiments of Argentina’s conservative Federalists party with the incipient Nationalist movement. The movement represented a curious relic of broader French counterrevolutionary traditions, based on Catholic natural law and on an aspiration to reconstruct the patrimonial states and societies that prevailed before the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, the Nationalist movement had become the expression of the deep-rooted historical forces in Argentina that challenged and resisted the mainstream liberal conceptions of the state and society. Argentine Nationalists developed their own peculiar jargon intertwined with Catholic theology. Coming over with Spanish and Italian immigrants in the 1920’s, an intolerant version of Catholicism
had merged with the Nationalist movement and began to permeate Argentine political life, especially the military. Catholic Nationalists, such as Walter Beveraggi Allende, called their movement an “authentically Argentine struggle for Catholic truth and Hispanic tradition,” which was the enemy of “liberal philosophy, formal democracy, ideological colonization, and new forms of European and North American imperialism.” Yet, Catholic Nationalists also denounced Marxism.

Socialism in the minds of Catholic Nationalists constituted a corrupt offshoot of classical liberalism, the pagan Renaissance and false Protestant Reformation. Liberalism destroyed society through the concept of humans as individuals and equality of all. Marxism destroyed the nation’s organic structure based on the two pillars of an authoritative state and the Church by leveling all and establishing class equality. Worse, communism replaced the Church with a secular state. In addition, the ethics of liberalism argued that morality was based on rational intuition of a self-conscious person versus morality based on natural law or from divine revelation. Thus, Catholic Nationalist theologians made a curious link between leftist ideology and immorality because both stemmed from the negative effects of classical liberalism. The Catholic Nationalist movement lauded fascist dictators such as Francisco Franco in Spain who upheld Catholicism and worked closely with the Church to root-out communist influences. Catholic Nationalists only represented a small ultraconservative group of clerics, theologians, and thinkers, but they had a disproportionate influence on shaping the military’s ideology and anti-communist position.

A very close knit relationship between officers and Catholic Nationalist theologians in Argentina developed in the decades leading up to the coup, specifically
after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. During the 1950s and 1960s, Catholic Nationalist theologians and theorists actively participated in the most prestigious and high military club Círculo Militar. From 1959 to 1966, Catholic Nationalist thinkers published eleven articles in the military’s journal Revista Militar. During Onganía’s tenure in office, eight more articles printed in the journal supported the military’s efforts to combat communism, immorality, and restore Catholic values. The military included the input of Catholic Nationalists in strategic conferences devoted to forming counterrevolutionary pedagogy and technical strategy, such as the Inter-American Course on Counterrevolutionary War held in the Escuela Superior de Guerra in October 1961. Moreover, key books on Catholic Nationalist theology and pedagogy ended up in the stacks of Círculo Militar’s library made available for near 2500 active officers in the club during the 1960s.25

Catholic Nationalists such as Jordán Bruno Genta charged officers that it was the military’s role to subordinate the state and culture to religious doctrine and prevent the breakdown of the country’s spiritual unity. During a speech to senior army officers at the Círculo Militar, he proclaimed that “warriors represent the most esteemed class of the state, [because] the nation enters into political existence by virtue of war.”26 Later, he reflected that “positive law—as man’s own evanescent creation—was inferior to God’s law, and that the soldier owes his professional duties directly to the nation—whose essence is eternal—rather than to its formal law, which is ephemeral.”27 Catholic Nationalist theologians specifically taught the military that Catholicism was the most important component of national identity. The military’s mission was to prevent “the breakdown of the country’s spiritual unity” and subordinate the “state and culture to
Thus, Nationalist proponents within the military began to perceive themselves as “the last aristocracy” and the guardian of a “sacred territory and the western Christian way of life,” which answered not to the people or the law but to “God and history.” Consequently, military Nationalists of the twentieth century strove to uphold authoritarian rule and the concept of the organic society; they opposed liberalism, democracy, and communism.

To preserve the country’s Catholic traditions, during the 1960s the theologians encouraged the military to target one of the nation’s subtle enemies, communism. In 1964, Jordán Bruno Genta published *Guerra contrarevolucionario*, one of the most influential books that would contribute to shaping the military’s anti-communist position. Genta argued, “communist doctrine and practice are nothing more than modern liberalism, carried to its ultimate consequences in its rejection of the Western Christian order. Thus, one cannot separate communism from liberalism.”

Genta reminded the officers, “the political obligatory provision [of the armed forces] is to oppose a threat that compromises the very existence of the Fatherland, for example, the revolutionary war unleashed by communism.” “There is no other mode of action,” Genta emphasized, but “to counteract and overcome the ideological penetration of Marxist communism.”

Many nationalists officers within the military adopted the theology of Catholic nationalists during the 1960s, evident in their own writings. Perhaps the most salient example of the influences of Catholic Nationalism on the military is found in the writings of Col. Osiris J. Villegas, who Onganía later appointed as head of the National Council for Security (CONASE). Col. Villegas theories based on Catholic Nationalist thought helped link the communism threat to the youth’s degrading morals during the 1960s. He
agreed with Genta when he reflected that communism symbolized “the ulcer of extremism,” “a disease corroding the country’s entrails,” an invisible creeping “poison” or “cancer.” Above all, it threatened the nation’s “classical roots [cultura grecolatina] nourished by religion.” This supposedly dangerous “exotic ideology,” necessitated a “crusade,” to restore “moral purification” and the “defense of the national soul.”  

35 Not only would the military need to restore moral purity but they also would need to confront young intellectuals who espoused and openly propagated leftist ideology.

Catholic Nationalists specifically felt that the intellectuals within the nation’s universities fostered the diffusion of leftist ideology into society. Even as early as September 1943, while serving as the government’s delegate (interventor) in the national university of Rosario, Genta had stated that the national universities had been “taken advantage of by the Marxists to lay the conditions for the total subversion of the principle of authority.”  

36 Twenty years later, Genta again reminded the officers, “it is the intellectuals who are the protagonists of subversion, not the masses.” He stressed, “the national universities are today the central headquarters of the communist ruling class within our country.”  

37 Col. Villega supported Genta’s theory that the battle ground for the struggle against communism would take place in the cultural and intellectual centers. In his book, Guerra revolucionario comunista, he warned his fellow officers that “subversion is the procedure chosen [by the communists],” and operates through penetration “of all the national powers structures,” including “universities and cultural centers.”  

38 The influences of ultra-conservative Catholic Nationalist theologians had shaped the officers own definition of communism and justifications for their eventual cultural reforms aimed at rooting out leftist influences within Argentina. Such theological
persuasions convinced the generals that by physically creating a moral, conservative and
traditional culture, they could shield the nations youth from further exposure and
acceptance of leftist ideology. However, although the officers promised the nation
spiritual unity, moral consolidation and the removal of communism, social history cannot
be constructed solely on lofty goals found in political discourse. Equally important to
discourse is how the military carried out their social and cultural reforms. They made
their rhetoric reality by an implementing a morality campaign to halt the nation’s immoral
actions, especially among the youth. They also combated the spread of leftist ideologies by
intervening in the nation’s universities. Later, the government continued its cultural
reforms through passing and enforcing censorship and anti-communist legislation.

**Combating Immorality and Communism through Cultural Reform**

On 23 July 1966, not even a month after the military seized control of the country,
the newly appointed mayor of Buenos Aires, Col. Enrique Schettini, launched a morality
campaign aimed at addressing the youth’s immorality and combating all that affected the
traditional Catholic sense of family. Schettini designated the nephew of Gen. Onganía,
naval officer Col. Enrique Green, as the secretary of the Municipal Police, and ex-captain
Luis Margaride as Col. Green’s lieutenant, holding the position of head of the General
Inspection Board of the Municipality. Col. Green, who had declared that he was “a
militant Catholic,” wholeheartedly supported Gen. Ongania’s plans to rid society of
communist influences and preserve the nation’s morals.\(^{39}\)

On the same day, in a press conference Col. Green and Margaride identified the
evils affecting society and rationalized their future remedies. “Many inhabitants of the
country,” Col. Green declared, “are ill with a contagious disease…immorality.”

According to Col. Green, excessive liberal atheism caused by modernization and the spread of communism destroyed the pillars of Argentine society, what he called “Argentinidad…a respect for religious and moral principles and historic tradition.”

Therefore, he stated, “in order for the decent man and woman to be respected and considered by their co-citizens, it is necessary to eliminate undesirable people.”

During the 1966 morality crusade, young middle-class men and women representing the “modern youth,” found themselves at the center of a campaign that attempted to prevent the spread of leftist ideologies and immorality. The police arrested youth caught necking in cars or mingling together with the opposite sex on street corners. Spotlights installed to illuminate the city’s park benches supposedly prevented “immoral” public displays of affection. The General Inspection Division ordered clubs to improve their lighting and conducted daily inspection of places in which rock-and-roll bands played. They also closed down popular cinemas and well-know theatres. Police forces raided the Maipo and Nacional cabarets (equivalents of the Lido in Paris) and reported errant husbands to their wives. Boys who wore their hair long, such as members of one of Argentina’s first rock and roll bands, Los Beatniks, ended up in jail for violating the police edicts of public scandal and drunkenness. A report emphasized, “their main characteristic is that they wear long hair, according to the fashion imposed by the famous ‘Beatles.'” Even girls who wore short miniskirts ended up in jail. Young Argentine women found themselves in a quandary, on the one hand newspapers celebrated and department stores sold the new modern and provocative fashions
originating from Europe and the United States; on the other hand, the police arrested girls who wore them.  

Furthermore, Col. Green and Margaride backed up the officers’ discourse that linked youthful immorality with the corrupting influences of modernization and communism. During a television program, Col. Green promised the nation, “we will repress in a concrete way all pornographic magazines. We do not have to forget that these are the bases for communist penetration among our youth.” In the first two weeks of the campaign, Col. Green ordered police to confiscate at least twenty-seven sexually provocative magazines from newsstands, such as imported Playboy magazines. However, surveillance and repression of young men and women took on many different forms during the Argentine Revolution, including state intervention in the national autonomous universities, the heart of supposed youth immorality and the alleged bastion of leftist ideologies.

Gen. Onganía and his cabinet members believed that the state of the national universities had strayed far from their view of the function of higher education and warranted intervention. From 1958 to 1967, as matriculation in the national universities rose, perceptions of the function of the university began to change. During those years, the nations’ total university youth swelled with a 75 percent increase in enrollment from 137,673 to 240,452. Whereas before, the traditional mission outfitted children with useful skills to make a living and become productive citizens, now in the midst of a decade in cultural, social and political flux, many began to see the schools, particularly the national universities, as a promoter of social change. During the 1960s, young academics became increasingly critical of society, politics and especially the military. Many university
students embraced leftist ideologies and ideas of revolution within the national universities and began to voice their dissatisfactions through protest. At the time of the coup, both students and professors participated in more than twelve national leftist groups, ranging from Marxist Nationalists to Maoists, Trotskyists, Revolutionary Left (Guevaristas) and the official Communist Party.\textsuperscript{53} The leftist political groups’ high membership provided evidence for the military that intellectuals within the national universities had become dangerously radical in their political activism through their unchecked consumption and discussions of Marxist literature. Therefore, the administration took measures to end the autonomy of the universities and to revise the system of higher education to root-out communism among the intellectuals once and for all.

On 29 July 1966, six days after the government enacted the morality campaign, Gen. Onganía passed Law 16.912, which banned all student political groups and ended the old tripartite system of shared university administrative power.\textsuperscript{54} That evening, in response to the students and faculties’ protest against the government’s new law, the Ministry of the Interior, Enrique Martínez Paz, ordered more than a hundred federal agents to restore order. They unloaded from police assault vehicles into the plazas in front of several departments of the National University of Buenos Aires. Within the Department of Exact Sciences, students and department members stood poised behind doors barred by desks, chairs, and chains. Receiving no response from their demands to evacuate, the police busted into the building and filled the halls with tear gas. Police officers then lined up in two rows and forced the dean, assistant dean, several professors, and more than 200 students to run the gauntlet as they used their rifle butts and batons to batter them unmercifully. At the end of the confrontation, more than 400 students from the University of Buenos Aires found
themselves in the paddy cars, handcuffed and arrested, 30 of them had been sent to the hospital.\textsuperscript{55}

After what was called the “Night of the Long Batons,” Martínez Paz placed the system of higher education under the control of Carlos María Gelly y Obes, the Subsecretary of Culture and Education and established an Advisory Council with ten members to draw up a new law for the operation of the universities.\textsuperscript{56} The following year, the council reached a conclusion on how to prevent the spread of communism within the universities and restore the pure objectives of the system of higher education. The “National Universities: Organic Law,” placed the system of higher education under the control of the government and eliminated the students methods of voicing their opinions. Students and alumni no longer could vote in governmental bodies of the universities as they did under old tripartite governmental system. Pro-military rectors, deans and professors now held decisive power. To snuff out leftist influences, the new law upheld Law 16.912, which had banned all student organizations. The new law also prohibited students and professors from engaging in \textit{any} political activities and gave the government legal power to intervene in the universities whenever it considered such action to be in the national interest.\textsuperscript{57}

The new university law emerged from the philosophy of the military’s earlier documents and speeches with much emphasis placed on the need to instill Catholic values in the masses and to prevent the spread of communism. “The university,” Gen. Onganía had declared, “is the organ forming national character and the transmitter of the most precious part of our spiritual heritage.” Communism within the university “corrupts youth with a foreign ideology that is destructive of our purest spiritual values.”\textsuperscript{58} After the
intervention, Gen. Onganía’s gave a speech to the nation in which he argued that the “new university policy was to train professionals, technocrats and scientists who love their land and who desire to serve their community.” The government ostensibly would preserve academic freedom, yet the generals’ placed greater emphasis on the diffusion of national culture and patriotic and spiritual values. However, communism influenced more than university intellectuals, necessitating specific legal measures to rid the country of its harm.

**The Argentine Revolution’s Anti-Communist and Censorship Laws**

During the first six months of the Argentine Revolution, Gen. Onganía decreed the “National System of Planning and Action for National Security” which eventually resulted in the creation of the National Council for Security, known as CONASE (Consejo Nacional de Seguridad). Gen. Onganía appointed Nationalist Col. Osiris J. Villegas as the head of CONASE. Col. Villegas had clearly demonstrated in his speeches and writings that combating communism and restoring the country’s Catholic values would receive top priority while establishing National Security. After the intervention in the national universities and the four-month long morality crusade, in correlation with CONASE, the government continued combating communism and restoring the nation’s morals by positing their cultural reforms within rhetoric to preserve national security. Specific legislation provides salient examples of the government’s new discourse.

Shortly after its creation, CONASE drafted Law 16.940, “Communist Ideology: Postal Circulation,” passed on 18 October 1966. The legislation prohibited the sending of communist literature through the mail and enabled the government to open and destroy any material that supposedly contained links to the circulation of leftist material.
Ironically, besides outlawing the circulation of “propaganda doctrine…of communist objectives and purposes,” The law also specified that the post office could seize any “books, prints, engravings, paintings, lithographs and photographs of immoral character.” Even within this specific anti-communist piece of legislation, the administration equated the danger of “immoral” material with the spread of leftist ideologies. When a government representative announced the law to the nation, he argued that they passed this law to aid in the preservation of “our Western and Christian lifestyle…of our traditions and family organization, [and to] safeguard the future generations from dangerous destructors of our nationality…which conspires against international communism.”

During their first six months in office, Onganía and his cabinet members considered that they had made progress in combating communism and restoring the country’s spiritual and moral community based on its traditional Catholic values. However, by late 1966, inflation continued to rise and the government still had no clear plan to bring economic stabilization. The unpopular morality crusade, the violent university intervention, and the government’s lack of action to fulfill its economic promises, generated a profound feeling of discontent, even delegitimizing the government among the Buenos Aires citizenry. In response, Gen. Onganía appointed new members to all of the cabinet positions, including internationally respected economist Adalbert Krieger Vasena as the new economic minister.

Vasena had been active before the coup, representing Argentina during several meeting of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to ensure Western countries of Argentina’s resolve to participate in free trade and open markets. His plans for economic reform paid off after Gen. Onganía appointed him as Economic Minister in
January 1967. He eventually drafted his plan for reform to the Inter-American Committee of the Alliance for Progress, promising to adhere to the strict guidelines set forth by the international financial community. Vasena’s “Action Program for 1967” satiated international lenders and anti-communist politicians in the United States. In response, the International Monetary Fund, the U.S. Treasury and a consortium of North American, European, and Japanese banks lent Argentina over $400 million to jumpstart Vasena’s reform measures.\textsuperscript{64}

Although the other members of the new cabinet supported Vasena’s semi-liberal economic reform policies, they continued their struggle to preserve Catholic values and combat communism. All but two of Gen. Onganía’s second cabinet were members of the \textit{Ateneo de la República}, a Catholic Nationalist Organization, heavily influenced by Italian and Spanish fascism.\textsuperscript{65} The members of the Ateneo, possessed an authoritative right-wing Catholic mind-set and embraced the Nationalist movement. As a result, many within the cabinet agreed with Gen. Onganía that communism had degraded Argentina, especially the youth’s morals, and that belief in God had disappeared. Even though Vasena’s economic program generated excitement and directed the nation’s and international attention to its progress, Gen. Onganía’s second cabinet members found innovative ways to continue to combat communism and immorality.

In August 1967, CONASE passed the government’s most effective piece of legislation to prevent the further spread of leftist ideologies and to deal with threatening elements already within the country. Law 17.401, “Communism: Rules of Repression,” gave agents of the Secretary of State Information (SIDE), the right to arrest anyone linked to spreading, harboring or engaging with communist materials. This legislation enabled SIDE
agents to classify anyone with “communist ideological motivation, [who] performed, by any means, proselytizing, subversive, [or] intimidating activities, or disturbers of public order,” as a “communist,” and imprison them from one to eight years.\(^6\) The government now possessed the legal right to prevent persons classified as communist from obtaining naturalization papers, state employment, licenses, scholarships, from manufacturing firearms for commercial purposes, working in printing or publishing firms, and from occupying trade union posts.\(^7\) Often, Argentines only found out that they had been classified as a communist threat after having been denied the right to participate in any of the above activities, or after they ended up in jail. The two pieces of anti-communist legislation allowed the military government to combat leftist influences in subtle but effective methods. Justifying arrests of subversives through legal means allowed government officials to pick and choose whomever they deemed to be a threat to national security. Within the first month of Law 17.401’s existence, police arrested twenty-four people. One of them, twenty six year old Alfredo Bass, a night school teacher in Salta, lost his job and ended up in prison because someone had tipped off the police of the existence of leftist books in his library.\(^8\) The government also passed specific censorship laws.

Argentine historian, Andrés Avellaneda argues that military dictatorships actively place censorship on culture because it is the expression of morality, sexuality, family, religion, and national security. Generals of the final dictatorship (1976-1983) made a distinction between “true culture” and “false culture.” What they called “true culture” reflected Argentina’s traditional values based on the country’s Catholic heritage. “False culture” did not subordinate itself to morality and reflected the negative influence of liberalism, individual utility, and leftist ideology. Through censorship of cultural mediums,
Avellaneda argues that the military, priests and fascist right-wing politicians of the final dictatorship attempted to construct an Argentine lifestyle reflecting its Catholic values “qualified at times as ‘heritage’, ‘tradition’, ‘Christian meaning of life’, and ‘origin.’”69 However, Avellaneda points out that the generals of the sixth military regime borrowed and modeled their methods of censorship after those implemented by Gen. Onganía.70

After the first six months in office, the military regime of the Argentine Revolution continued its struggle against immorality and the spread of leftist ideologies through media censorship. Following Col. Green’s censorship during the morality campaign, the administration continued to pull various “immoral” magazines and books from the market.71 Law 17.741 and Law 18.019 passed in May and December of 1968 respectively, gave the government the legal right to censor the entertainment industry.72 Law 18.019 empowered the government to cut out scenes or ban completely, movies, plays and television shows affecting “public morals, morality or national security.”73 Any material that included content that damaged marriage or family life by justifying abortion, prostitution, crime, sexual perversion, or adultery fell under the government’s censorship. On December 27, the Minister of the Interior, Gen. Guillermo Borda, criticized the entertainment industry, arguing the nation needed the laws because they “tend to the defense of the Argentine lifestyle [and] preserve Christian morality and family.” Furthermore, he reminded the citizens that the law expressed “the philosophy of the Argentine Revolution…which has the support of the great mass of the population that is fed up with eroticism, violence and immorality.”74

Government agents cut and pulled “immoral” movies, television shows, operas and plays at will. They snipped five erotic minutes of Michelangelo Antonioni’s lavishly
praised film “Blow-Up,” before only allowing those twenty one years or older to watch it. In addition, they completely banned Alberto Ginastera’s internationally acclaimed opera “Bomerzo” from the stage due to its “obsession with sex, violence and hallucination.” One source reported that rather than increase attendance of morally sound movies, the censorship law had decreased the overall average annual movie attendance from 7.2 movies a year in 1960 to 2.0 movies in 1970. Outraged at the government’s censorship, certain sectors of society voiced their discontent. In April of 1969, the Argentine Association of Actors filed a formal protest against the movie censorship law that had slowly narrowed the scope of acceptable films.

A month later, in May 1969, radical university students and disgruntled unionized workers rioted in several of Argentine major cities, bringing the country to a stand still and forcing Gen. Onganía to declare a state of siege. The emergency powers under a state of siege and the provisions of the anti-communist laws allowed the government to suppress anyone they wished. One source has suggested that by labeling union leaders and university students as communist allowed the administration to sentence them with long jail terms, regardless of their actual complicity in the riots. Amidst the turmoil and chaos during the final year of Onganía’s tenure in office, Gen. Onganía maintained his battle against immorality. Provocative literature continued to disappear from the newsstands, kiosks and bookstores. In a last ditch effort, on February 1970, Gen. Onganía established the National Council of Radio and TV Agency (CONART) to monitor and censure that aspect of media by improving the moral tone of their programs.
The May riots forged an anomalous alliance between the most radical university students and union workers creating the backbone of urban guerrilla groups that plagued the nation during the 1970s with their terrorism and rioting. In 1969, there were 114 armed operations, 434 in 1970 and 654 in 1971. The convergence of union workers and university students during the May riots and the ensuing wave of chaos caused many to question Gen. Onganía’s ability to maintain order and authority. Eventually in June 1970, disgruntled military officers disposed Onganía from office. His successor, Gen. Roberto M. Levingston (June 1970-March 1971), and the Argentine Revolution's final military president, General Alejandro A. Lanusse (March 1971-May 1973), feebly attempted to uphold the anti-communist and censorship laws during their time in office. Yet, the military’s worst nightmares had become a reality: the Argentine youth had cast off the constraints of Catholicism, embraced leftist ideologies and their political radicalization had turned to militancy.

**Conclusion**

From 1966 to 1973, the discourse and actions of authoritative and conservative Catholic-minded military officers, civilian cabinet members, and the Buenos Aires police targeted the “immorality” of the modern youth and the nation as a whole because they believed the internal threat of communism had degraded the country’s Catholic orientation and spiritual values. The influences of ultra-conservative Catholic Nationalists during the decades leading up to the coup shaped the officers own definition of the communist threat. By 1966, Gen. Onganía and his fellow officers were convinced that combating communism and immorality through cultural reform constituted the most effective means for its
removal—more important and effective than combating communism by stabilizing the economy. The new government invested time and energy into their cultural campaigns months before Gen. Ongania finally took action towards fulfilling his economic promises. After Vasena launched his plan for economic stabilization, Gen. Ongania persisted in combating communism and immorality through passing and enforcing anti-communist and censorship legislation. Furthermore, the military’s discourse and their crusades to combat and prevent the spread of leftist ideologies through a morality campaign, intervention in the nation’s universities, censorship, and anti-communist legislation departed from anti-communist rhetoric and actions in Western countries during the Cold War, especially the United States.

During the Cold War, some politicians and policy makers in the United States linked their struggle to combat international communism and totalitarianism with their country’s moral duty to preserve the freedom of religion. They often referred to the evil they faced as ‘God-less communism,’ a system that would curtail citizens’ rights to freedom of choice, especially their choice of religious practice and expression. Yet, in the U.S., these religious motivations did not drive geopolitical policies. National Security, the fear of World War III, and economic motivations—securing markets for trade and preserving sources for raw materials—better explain motivations for U.S. policy and diplomacy during the Cold War. In a sense, politicians employed religious rhetoric to “sell” the war to the public.

In Argentina, the officer’s definition of communism differed from North American’s definition. The military officers did not fear a political ideology that organized a classless society based on the common ownership of the means of production. They
targeted the nation’s loose morals and loss of spirituality because they believed such expressions indicated that leftist ideologies had already penetrated society and had contributed to the youth casting off Catholic values. Furthermore, the officers’ rhetoric and actions demonstrated that by constructing a moral and spiritual culture based on the country’s traditional religious values and eliminating the liberal atheistic cultural expressions, they believed that they could shield Argentina’s youth from further infiltration of leftist and liberal ideologies.

The subversive elements that so many saw creeping into society not only brought new ideas which questioned the framework of Argentine culture, but “spoiled” the youth from becoming Argentina’s future leading class. The nation could not be ruled by a generation of mediocre and liberal atheists. The preservation of a future generation of young people who possessed values based on Catholic Nationalist theology, which rejected leftist ideologies and the materialism of Western Culture, depended on the success of the generals’ social and cultural reforms during the Argentine Revolution.

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6 CIA, “Intelligence Information Cable,” NLBLA Library and Archives.
10 Argentine Republic. Directiva, 16.
11 Argentine Republic. Directiva, 16.
13 Argentine Republic. Directiva, 37.
14 Argentine Republic. Directiva, 9.
17 Argentine Republic. Directiva, 20.
19 Aldo César Vacs, Discreet Partners: Argentina and the USSR since 1917 (Pittsburgh, 1984) 27.
20 Osiel, Mass Atrocity, Ordinary Evil, and Hannah Arendt, 110.
22 Rock, Authoritarian Argentina, 28, 30, xv.
25 Observations of the presence of Catholic Nationalist influences are the result of noting all of the books written by Catholic Nationalist thinkers cataloged in the library of Círculo Militar, as well as noting all of the articles published in the military’s journal Revista Militar from 1959 to 1970 which are housed in the Círculo Militar’s archive. See also, Cnl. Horacio E. Querol, “Accion comunista en el campo educacional,” Revista Militar, Nº 663, enero-marzo 1962 which is a reproduction of the conference Curso Interamericano de Guerra Contrarevolucionaria held in the Escuela Superior de Guerra on 6 October 1961.
26 Jordán Bruno Genta, Libertad, 36 (Speech of September 5, 1951) quoted in David Rock, Authoritarian Argentina, 131.
30 David Rock, Authoritarian Argentina, xx.
32 Genta, Guerra contrarevolucionario, 249-250.
33 Genta, Guerra contrarevolucionario, 251.
37 Genta, Guerra Contrarevolucionario, 47, 210-212.
40 Ibid.
46 “Detuvose a integrantes de un trio musical,” La Prensa, 1 August 1966.
48 It is near impossible to know the exact number of people arrested during the morality campaign. Either the Federal Police did not give numbers to the press during their crusade or the press did not publish them, being afraid of possible censorship. Manzano has estimated that the police arrested at least 335 people for different violations during the first three first weeks of the campaign. See Manzano, “Sexualizing Youth,” 456.
50 Ibid.
53 For a list of the groups as well as membership by department see Herrick, Paul B., “The Political Consequences of the Argentine Revolution of 1966.” Doctoral Dissertation, Tulane University, April 1976, 284-5.
56 “Asumió su cargo el subsecretario del justicia,” La Prensa, 28 August 1966.
59 “Discurso que pronunció el primer magistrado,” La Prensa, 21 September 1968.
64 Vasena, The Economic Ministers Speak, 86.
65 For a list of the cabinet members who participated in the Ateneo de la Republic, and their various roles in the organization, which included founding members and past presidents see Clair Hugan Siegelbaum, “The first year of the Argentine Revolution: A New Experiment in Corporatism?” Doctoral Thesis, Harvard University, 1968, 113-114.
70 Ibid.


74 “Fue dictada una ley sobre contralor de exhibiciones de peliculas de cine y TV,” La Prensa, 27 December 1968.


77 “En asamblea extraordinaria la Asociación Argentina de Actores trató la ley de censura cinematográfica recientemente implantada,” La Prensa, 16 April 1969.


79 “Orientará a la radio y la TV en todo el país el Ministerio del Interior,” La Prensa, 14 February 1970.

80 Six major guerrilla groups went into action in 1969 and the following year: the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP), Shirtless Commandos, Montoneros, Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), Liberation Armed Forces (FAL) and the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP). See Moyano, Argentina’s Lost Patrol, 27.

Renata Keller

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Introduction

In the decade immediately following Castro’s 1959 revolution, Mexican leaders consistently distinguished themselves from their Latin American counterparts by acting as outspoken defenders of the Cuban people’s right to self-determination. Influential politicians such as Lázaro Cárdenas threw their support behind Castro, and in 1960 Mexican president Adolfo López Mateos welcomed Cuban president Osvaldo Dorticós in a lavish state visit. At the July 1964 meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C., Mexico was the only Latin American country that refused to adopt the resolution to break diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro’s Cuba and impose economic sanctions. Between 1964 and 1970, Mexico was the only country in Latin America that maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba, which effectively established Mexico as the sole link between Castro and the rest of the hemisphere.

By maintaining relations with Castro, the Mexican government effectively increased its own role in the Cold War contest between the United States, on one hand, and the Soviet Union and Cuba, on the other. Mexico became the staging ground for the non-violent aspects of the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere. All the people, money, information, and contraband items originating in or destined for Cuba had to pass through Mexico on the way to their final destinations. The Mexican government’s tolerance of this exchange network thwarted the United States’ efforts to suffocate Castro’s regime through isolation. Numerous sectors and members of the U.S. government had invested significant time, effort, and resources in the campaign to isolate Castro, and were ready to use whatever means necessary to achieve their goal. Why, then, did President López Mateos, and his successor Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, risk angering their powerful northern
neighbors and open their own national territory to revolutionary and counterrevolutionary infiltration by maintaining relations with Castro?

The first generation of scholars to contribute to the historical discussion of the effects of the Cuban revolution on Mexican foreign policy began publishing in the 1970s. Arthur K. Smith Jr., Olga Pellicer de Brody, and Mario Ojeda offered insightful discussions of Mexican politics, but were able to provide little in the way of documentation. In his 1970 dissertation, “Mexico and the Cuban Revolution: Foreign Policy-Making in Mexico Under President Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964),” Smith explored the development of Mexican policy toward Cuba, analyzing the internal and external pressures that López Mateos’ administration responded to in the formative years of Castro’s government. In her 1972 book, México y la Revolución Cubana, Pellicer argued that Mexico’s reaction to the Cuban revolution was the result of a process of negotiation between ideal precepts of international justice and pressure from interest groups within and outside of Mexico. In his 1976 book, Alcances y Límites de la Política Exterior de México, Ojeda argued that the ultimate goal of Mexican foreign policy has always been the protection and affirmation of national sovereignty.

In recent years, other scholars have begun to revisit the question of Mexican foreign policy toward Cuba, with the benefit of newly declassified Mexican and U.S. government documents. Ana Covarrubias examines the bilateral relationship between Mexico and Cuba in “Cuba and Mexico: A Case for Mutual Nonintervention.” In “Double Dealing: Mexico’s Foreign Policy Toward Cuba,” Kate Doyle asserts that “Mexico managed a dangerous diplomatic dance: maintaining a public stance of support for the Castro regime while secretly conceding much more to U.S. pressure than has been
acknowledged by analysts.” Christopher M. White argues that the Mexican government used the Cuban issue to help establish a peaceful way for the Third World to have a say in international affairs in *Creating a Third World: Mexico, Cuba, and the United States During the Castro Era*. The work of these scholars marks significant progress in both the analysis and documentation of Mexican foreign policy considerations and objectives. However, most of these historians devote more attention to the ideological and external factors that contributed to Mexico’s decision to maintain relations with Cuba, while I will argue that internal pressures played a much larger role. The fact that the Mexican government responded to internal, not external, pressures on the Cuban issue suggests that it had more power and flexibility on the international level and less on the national one. This relative balance of powers calls into questions most historians’ depictions of the Mexican government as a semi-dictatorial regime beholden to foreign interests.

The Mexican government maintained relations with Cuba because defending Castro’s government posed less of a threat to Mexico’s internal political stability than appearing to acquiesce to U.S. pressure. López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz led a hegemonic governing coalition called the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that had dominated Mexican politics for three decades, and proved determined to hold the multi-group alliance together. To do so, they had to strike a delicate balance between the right and left wings of their party, and avoid alienating important sectors of the electorate. As Mexico’s political stability was of crucial importance to the United States, the Mexican government knew that U.S. leaders would hesitate to take any actions that might weaken the PRI’s control. Likewise, Mexican leaders anticipated that by increasing their country’s importance to Cuba as its sole link to the Americas, they could give Castro a reason to
refrain from encouraging any revolutionary activity within Mexico that might upset the status quo. A closer examination of the potential drawbacks and benefits of maintaining relations with Cuba will demonstrate that the Mexican government gained much more than it lost from defending Castro. As long as López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz successfully walked the diplomatic tightrope between the United States and Cuba, they could use the delicate situation to benefit their regime’s reputation both at home and abroad.

Mexico: The Port of Entry for Castro’s Revolution?

One of the chief objectives of the OAS campaign to isolate Castro was to make it harder for him to export revolution to other countries. The governments of the United States and many Latin American countries feared that Castro’s support of guerrilla “foco” groups would destabilize their regimes, and lead to a repeat of Fulgencio Batista’s fate. Even though the most threatening aspect of Castro’s revolution was its example, Cuba did not rely upon exemplary power alone to encourage imitators. According to a CIA study, by 1961 Castro had started supporting revolutionaries in countries such as Panama, Nicaragua and Haiti by providing training, arms, money, communications support, and military assistance.1 The 1964 OAS resolution directly attempted to obstruct the travel of people and supplies between Cuba and the rest of the hemisphere.

Even before the OAS resolution, Mexico served as an important connection point between Castro and fellow revolutionaries in the rest of the Americas. In a November

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1962 National Intelligence Estimate titled “Castro’s Subversive Capabilities in Latin America,” the authors of the report stated: “Mexico is the most important outside base for Cuban propaganda and subversive operations into the rest of Latin America.” The report emphasized the role of Cuban embassies in spreading Communist propaganda, cultivating local leftist groups, and distributing funds for subversive purposes. In November 1962, Mexico was one of only five countries that still hosted a Cuban embassy. When Mexico became the only country to maintain diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1964, its importance as a port of entry for people, money, and contraband goods increased.

The Cuban embassy in Mexico City was at the center of an international web of espionage, contraband, and propaganda. Ex-CIA agent Philip Agee claimed in his memoir/exposé that “Over half the officers in the [Cuban] mission are known or suspected intelligence officers.” According to Agee, the main operations of the officers in the Cuban embassy were: the infiltration of the Cuban exile communities in Mexico, Central America, and the U.S.; the supply of propaganda and support to revolutionary organizations in Mexico and Central America; and the organization of the travel of revolutionaries from Latin America and the United States to Cuba for training.

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2 “Castro’s Subversive Capabilities in Latin America,” 9 Nov 1962, National Security Files, National Intelligence Estimates, Box 9, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas [hereafter National Security Estimates, NSF, Box 9, LBJ Library].

3 The other four countries were Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Brazil. Leticia Bobadilla González, México y la OEA: Los debates diplomáticos, 1959-1964 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2006).

4 While many people have taken strong issue with the political and moral implications of Agee’s disclosures, no one has yet challenged the veracity of his claims. Philip Agee, Inside the Company: CIA Diary (New York: Stonehill Publishing Company, 1975), 523.

5 Ibid., 523.
Cuban exile Pedro L. Roig Ortega corroborated Agee’s claims in his own exposé about his experiences working first in the offices of Press and Information (OPI) in Cuba, and then in the Cuban embassy in Mexico City.\(^6\) Roig described Mexico as a “trampoline of distribution” for tons of Communist propaganda destined for all parts of the Americas.\(^7\) According to Roig, the Embassy’s Commercial Councilor, Ramón Cuenca, “mobilized and controlled the entire net of espionage, arms traffic, contraband, and shipments of tons of Communist propaganda, that from there, was sent to Cuba and other countries of Central and South America.”\(^8\) Roig also accused embassy officials of equipping travelers to Cuba with special visas that they could keep separate from their passport, so that officials in their countries of origin would not know of their true destination. Furthermore, Roig claimed that the Cultural Department of the Cuban embassy was the “point of contact and penetration of the universities and high schools” of Mexico, where the Cubans worked to “recruit followers and promote conflict.”\(^9\)

Officials within the United States government also expressed concern that the Cuban embassy supported and encouraged revolutionary groups in other countries. According to a State Department report from June 1967, “travel to Cuba for guerrilla training for Latin Americans is arranged and financed by the Cuban Embassy in Mexico.”\(^10\) The same document also referred to an incident in September 1966 in which


\(^{7}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{10}\) “Guerrilla Problem in Latin America,” circa June 1967, Intelligence File, NSF, LBJ Library.
Mexican authorities had uncovered an arms smuggling channel that had provided over four thousand weapons to Guatemalan insurgents. An employee of the Cuban embassy, Julian López Días, who was involved in the smuggling channel, quickly returned to Havana after the discovery. A September 1968 Intelligence Memorandum stated:

Cuba began providing material assistance to the Guatemalan guerrilla movement in early 1962… Since [August 1967] there have been several reports that funds have been passed to Guatemalan guerrilla representatives by members of the Cuban diplomatic staff in Mexico City. According to an unconfirmed report of last January, the FAR [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias] was receiving $15,000 each month from Cuba via this Mexican channel.11

The same memo contained a map of guerrilla supply routes that originate in the Cuban embassy in Mexico City, and after passing through Guatemalan exiles in Mexico, made their way to rebel groups within Guatemala. The only other points of origin of supplies noted on the map were “possible sea routes,” suggesting that U.S. officials believed the Cuban Embassy to be the main source of supplies for the rebel groups.

While the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City occupied most of the attention of officials in the United States and Mexico, other suspected points of entry received occasional notice. On July 7, 1959, the New York Times reported Mexican villagers’ complaints about a group of heavily armed mercenaries, believed to be from Cuba, who landed at the tip of the Yucatan peninsula and forced the locals to supply food.12

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February 1, 1960, the American Consulate in Mérida reported rumors that the “cacique” of Isla Mujeres, Lic. Jesus Lima, was a “red” whose hacienda was the center of smuggling activities, including the clandestine movement of arms and soldiers.13 The Consulate informed the State Department: “It is said that the Cuban revolutionaries have been secreted out of Cuba, trained on the Lima hacienda, and returned to Cuba by air.” Unable to confirm the rumors, the Consulate revealed one of the sources of the story—the Mexican Chief of Customs at Progreso, Lic. Joaquín de la Gala y de Rejil. Later that year, the same Consulate passed along another unconfirmed report of a small Cuban plane laden with propaganda leaflets landing in a henequen field.14 Regardless of the veracity of the rumors, the dispatches indicate that both U.S. and Mexican officials were on the alert for suspicious activities across the country.

Most of the contraband arms, propaganda, money, and persons that passed through Mexico from Cuba were destined for revolutionary groups in other countries, like Guatemala, and thus affected the Mexican government only indirectly. However, the possibility always existed that dissident groups and individuals within Mexico could receive support through those same Cuban smuggling channels. In the tense month leading up to the Olympic Games that Mexico hosted October 12-27, 1968, the Mexican navy and military were on alert for the “possible Cuban infiltration of arms destined for student use.”15 A CIA intelligence cable reported that an anonymous source had learned


15 The Mexican government would have been especially sensitive to the threat of contraband weapons arriving in student hands in the summer and fall of 1968, when a spontaneous student movement was disturbing the peaceful image that the government hoped to present when it hosted the Olympic Games that
that the Cuban government planned to send arms to students and student sympathizers during a demonstration on the 15\textsuperscript{th} or 16\textsuperscript{th} of September. According to the cable, the Mexican government took the threat seriously enough to put both the navy and the military on alert.

Nevertheless, Díaz Ordaz’s administration did not make a single public denunciation of Cuban support for dissident groups during the 1968 student movement, even after the October 2 massacre of scores of student protestors by military officers in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Plaza.\textsuperscript{16} The fact that the Mexican government chose not to pick a fight with Cuba or cut off diplomatic relation even when it suspected Cuban participation in the biggest scandal of the decade suggests that it had significant reasons for protecting the relationship. The Mexican government was aware of the risks posed by maintaining relations with Cuba, but made the strategic decision to do so anyway. The second half of this study will examine the reasons behind this decision.

\section*{Pressure From the United States}

The main muscle behind the campaign to isolate Cuba came from the United States, where Fidel Castro was public enemy number one. After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Kennedy administration opted to pursue anti-Castro policies that did not require direct military involvement. The administration widened the embargo initiated under President Dwight D. Eisenhower to include nearly all forms of trade, and

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October. “Mexican Military Alert for Possible Cuban Infiltration of Arms Destined for Student Use,” 24 Aug 1968, Country File, NSF, Box 60, LBJ Library.
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“insisted that Latin American nations drive Cuba out of the inter-American community, the Organization of American States.” Members of the U.S. government proved willing and able to apply economic and diplomatic pressure upon other countries in order to achieve their foreign policy objectives.

Mexico’s economic dependence on the United States exposed the country to pressure from its northern neighbor. In 1966, Mexico relied on the U.S. to buy sixty percent of the nation’s exports and to provide the same percentage of its imports. Between sixty and seventy percent of the foreign investment in Mexico in the 1960s originated in the United States. In 1961, the Mexican government sought a $400 million loan from the U.S. to refinance its short-term dollar obligations and invest in new development. U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Thomas Mann, advised his government to condition the loan on a “quiet program of action” to reduce Communist infiltration into Mexican politics. Mann suggested that the program include the removal of known Communists from public office, the reduction of Communist influence in educational institutions and labor organizations, control of Cuban and Soviet efforts to introduce propaganda, and increased Mexican participation in hemispheric defense efforts. In the event that the Mexican government was not amenable to such requests, Mann recommended that the United States could withdraw from the discussions in the


18 Mario Ojeda, Alcances y límites de la política exterior de México (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1976) 118.

19 Ibid., 119.

“friendliest and most relaxed manner,” and then “put a ‘slow man’ on [the] job of passing on Mexican requests for assistance.”

Ambassador Mann advocated the use of similar forms of economic persuasion six months later, when Mexican delegates to the OAS opposed a call for collective action against Cuba. In a December 6 telegram to the Secretary of State, Mann wrote:

Until we can judge with some degree of certainty [the] probable Mexican role at [the January 10 Meeting of Foreign Ministers], I further recommend that we should delay action on any loans to Mexico and that we should influence international lending institutions to hold up consideration of current Mexican loan applications.

It is unclear whether anyone in Washington followed Mann’s advice; between January 1961 and July 1962, the Mexican government received almost $800 million in loans from the United States government and international lending agencies. Even if the Kennedy administration ignored Mann’s suggestions to tie loan approval to the Mexican government’s stance on Cuba and Communism, the potential threat was certainly there. The Mexican government depended on loans from the United States, and knew that any money was likely to come with strings attached.

The U.S. government also proved willing to exert diplomatic pressure upon other countries to gain allies in its campaign against Cuba. Mexican delegates to international

\[\text{\footnotesize}21\text{ Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize}22\text{ “Telegram from Thomas Mann to Secretary of State” 6 Dec 1961, Country File, NSF, Box 141, JFK Library.}\]

organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the OAS consulted their counterparts from the United States before making important decisions. According to an April 10, 1961, telegram from U.S. ambassador to the UN, Adlai E. Stevenson, to the State Department, the Mexican delegate, Luis Padilla Nervo, came to consult with Stevenson about sponsoring a potential African-Asian resolution recommending a peaceful resolution to the differences between the U.S. and Cuba. 24 Padilla Nervo informed Stevenson that Mexican foreign minister Manuel Tello had approved Mexican sponsorship of the resolution—“if [the] US did not object.” 25 Stevenson replied that the United States strongly opposed the resolution, and Padilla Nervo agreed to report the U.S.’s objection to Foreign Minister Tello. The Mexican representative also “implied [that] in [the] circumstances they would not co-sponsor” the resolution. The fact that the Mexican foreign minister consulted U.S. government officials before making important foreign policy decisions demonstrates the influence that the U.S. had over Mexican policy.

A report prepared by the State Department and the CIA in January 1964 details the range of pressure that the United States exerted to isolate Cuba. To reduce trade shipping to Cuba, the U.S. “maintained diplomatic pressure on free-world nations to reduce and eventually eliminate their ships in the Cuba trade,” and “restrict[ed] economic and military assistance to countries with ships in the Cuba trade.” 26 The report also

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25 Ibid.

detailed efforts to reduce air service to Cuba, which included “invoking recent legislation denying assistance to countries whose ships and aircraft carry commodities to and from Cuba.” Furthermore, the authors of the paper reported that “we have exerted pressure to persuade free-world countries to break diplomatic relations with Cuba.” This report reveals the degree to which the United States was willing and able to compel other countries to participate in its campaign against Castro.

The United States Congress’s response to Mexico’s refusal to comply with the 1964 OAS resolution contains further evidence of the U.S. government’s readiness to use economic pressure to influence Mexican foreign policy. When Mexico refused to break diplomatic relations with Cuba, the United States Congress retaliated with economic sanctions. In 1965, Congress reduced Mexico’s sugar quota by 55,000 tons.27 The President of the Senate Agricultural Commission justified the reduction, stating that “Mexico does not depend primarily on its sugar exports, and its foreign policy is not very close to that of the United States, especially in the OAS.”28

The question remains: Why did the Mexican government submit itself to open—and covert—economic retaliation from its chief trading partner in order to defend Castro’s regime? Why did it consciously allow the Cuban government to use Mexican territory as a thoroughfare for Cuban arms, propaganda, money, and revolutionaries? Part of the answer is that neither of the potential dangers—Communist infiltration and U.S. pressure—significantly hurt or threatened the Mexican government itself. Presidents

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López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz were more concerned with holding together the PRI’s governing coalition than with Cold War geopolitics. The following sections will establish that the government had more to fear from internal threats than external ones; by walking the tightrope between Cuban and U.S. demands, the government was able to neutralize potential threats from both within and outside its borders.

**Mexico’s Internal Balancing Act**

As its name suggests, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional dated its origins to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. President Plutarco Eliás Calles founded the party in 1929 as the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), as a way to stabilize the country and institutionalize the rule of the group of military leaders and politicians who had governed since 1920. The party brought together groups from the left, right, and center of the political spectrum that had become tired of decades of chaos and violence. Beginning in 1929, every single president of Mexico came from this party—which changed its name to the PRI in 1946—giving party officials hegemonic power over Mexican politics. However, since the coalition government operated through consent rather than coercion, it had to keep its constituent groups satisfied enough to stay within the partnership. This need to please significantly limited the government’s policy options in the case of Cuba.

One of the greatest threats to the PRI’s hegemonic control and Mexico’s political stability came from Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas, one of Mexico’s most popular ex-presidents and leader of the left-leaning sectors of the PRI, distinguished himself early on as one of Fidel Castro’s most ardent supporters. When the Mexican police arrested Castro

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for visa violations in June 1956, Cárdenas interceded with President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines on his behalf. Cárdenas apparently saw his own nationalist fervor reflected in Castro’s actions, and declared: “Faced with the campaign developed abroad by enemies of Cuba’s revolution, authorized voices make themselves heard, asking for comprehension and moral support on her behalf.” On July 26, 1959, he traveled to Havana to attend the commemoration of Castro’s failed attack on the Moncada Barracks. Cárdenas’ support for Castro made politicians in Mexico and the United States exceedingly nervous; Cárdenas enjoyed so much prestige among workers and campesinos that U.S. ambassador to Mexico Robert C. Hill considered him “the most powerful political personality in Mexico.”

Cárdenas and other leftists forced the conservative sectors of the PRI to mollify their attitude toward Cuba in order to prevent a severely destabilizing split in the party.

In March 1961, Cárdenas convened the World Peace Movement’s Latin American Conference for National Sovereignty, Economic Emancipation, and Peace in Mexico City. Cárdenas intended the conference to draw international attention to the miserable conditions in Latin America, denounce the pernicious effect of imperialist activities in the

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30 Carlos Tello Díaz, El fin de una amistad: La relación de México con la revolución cubana (Mexico City: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2005), 33.


32 “Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration,” 11 Aug 1960, 712.00/8-1160, NADS, Mexico 1960-January 1963 [hereafter “Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration”].

33 Historian Eric Zolov summarizes the situation nicely: “For the government of Mexico, what was at risk was not the containment of communism, but of cardenismo.” Eric Zolov, “¡Cuba sí, yanquis no!": el saqueo del Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano en Morelia, Michoacán, 1961,” in Espejos de la guerra fría: México, América Central y el Caribe, ed Daniela Spenser (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2004), 175-214.
region, and defend the Cuban Revolution. On April 18, 1961, Cárdenas led a large demonstration against the Bay of Pigs invasion in the Zócalo square in Mexico City. Estimates of attendance ranged from 15,000 to 80,000 people. In addition, Cárdenas sent a message denouncing the invasion to a wide range of international institutions and leaders, including the United Nations, the presidents of numerous countries, and Walter Lippman of the New York Herald Tribune. Cárdenas stated: “Cuba is not alone. The attempts to isolate her have failed.”

Cárdenas also led the effort to establish a new, Mexican, leftist organization—the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) in August 1961. The MLN was a reformist movement with numerous internal and external goals, including defense of the Cuban Revolution. Cárdenas delivered the keynote speech at the meeting to inaugurate the new organization on August 4, stating,

At this meeting, to which you have invited me, my words come to add themselves to the manifestations of the patriots and progressives of Mexico and of all the Latin American peoples, in their conviction in the defense of the democratic autonomy of our nations, in their solidarity with the heroic Cuba that knew how to

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35 Eric Zolov, “¡Cuba sí, yanquis no!” 181.


37 Olga Pellicer de Brody, México y La Revolución Cubana (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1972), 100.
reject the foreign invasion with the unity of its own people, and in solidarity with the other Latin American nations.\footnote{Palabras Y Documentos Públicos De Lázaro Cárdenas 1928-1970, 133.}

It is important to note that the MLN, although it expressed sympathy with the revolutionary Cuban government, was a reformist group, not a revolutionary one.\footnote{Pellicer de Brody, México y la Revolución Cubana, 106-107.} Leaders of the movement sought to unite the existing leftist groups within Mexico, including independent leftist organizations, the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), and the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). Leaders of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional presented themselves as an interest group, not a political party—but the possibility remained that the movement could convert into a party and draw away the leftist sectors of the PRI’s coalition.

At the same time that the leftist sectors were pushing the government to defend Cuba, the conservative members of the PRI were also attempting to exert pressure on the government to act on the Cuban issue. The National Action Party (PAN), a pro-clerical minority party, allied with the Catholic Church in an anti-Communist campaign with the slogan “Christianity, yes—Communism, no.”\footnote{“Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration.”} In April 1960, the secretary of the recently created National Anti-Communist Party of Mexico (PNA) explained to the U.S. embassy that the role of the PNA was to praise the government’s good actions and censure its bad ones.\footnote{“National Anti-Communist Party of Mexico,” 25 April 1960, 712.00/4-2560, NADS, Mexico 1960-January 1963.} According to the American embassy, however, the rightist
opposition lacked dynamic leadership and mass appeal, and as of August 1960 “[had] not been successful in making much of an impression on either the dominant party or the administration.” In addition, the Embassy speculated whether or not the PNA was really a pawn of the administration, used to voice government sentiment rather than influence it. Thus, pressure from the right existed, but Mexican government authorities probably perceived it as less threatening to internal stability than the pressure from the left.

A telegram from the American embassy in Mexico City to the U.S. Department of State summarized the threat that the Cuban Revolution posed to Mexico’s internal political stability. On November 30, 1962, the Embassy sent a telegram with the following assessment of President López Mateos’ predicament: “A break with Castro would probably precipitate a domestic political crisis, perhaps involving serious public disorders … and might even split the PRI.”

U.S. government officials described López Mateos’ policy toward Cuba as a way to appease Cárdenas and the leftist sectors of the PRI. In a report to the State Department, the secretary of the American embassy in Mexico City, Alberto M. Vazquez, stated: “In order to mollify the left and neutralize the effect of its pressure, PRI and administration leaders have, at least verbally, assumed a leftist posture.”

According to a U.S. government background paper on the Mexican politico-economic situation in February 1964, the Cuban issue continued to threaten the stability

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42 “Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration.”

43 “National Anti-Communist Party of Mexico.”


45 “Pressure of the Mexican Left on the Administration.”
of the Mexican government in the months leading up to the OAS meeting in Washington. Looking ahead to the approaching transfer of power from López Mateos to Díaz Ordaz in November 1964, the paper stated that “the Mexican Government regards the issue of Cuba as the most serious threat to national unity.” If this assessment of the Mexican government’s predicament was correct, as the lack of evidence to the contrary suggests, then Mexico’s refusal to break relations with Cuba was both predictable and practical. Maintaining relations with Castro was a way to mollify the leftist sectors of Mexican society by taking away their grounds for complaint.

**Mexico Asserts Its Independence**

The Mexican government’s decision to maintain relations with Cuba also helped stabilize the internal political situation because it appeared to be a bold gesture of defiance toward the United States. Leftist sectors of the PRI frequently accused conservative ones of excessive collaboration with and submission to U.S. interests. The Cuban situation gave the Mexican government the chance to assert its independence from the United States on a matter that carried more rhetorical than practical weight. Thus, the López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz administrations effectively stole the thunder of their leftist critics.

The Mexican government was not alone in its attempt to use the Cuban situation to improve its reputation for political autonomy. According to a July 1961 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, “a number of governments have seized upon the Castro issue to

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show their independence of the United States.”\(^{47}\) The Brazilian government also vocally supported Castro’s regime, until the April 1964 ouster of President João Goulart. The governments of Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay stood alongside Mexico in voting against the 1964 OAS resolution, but—unlike Mexico—complied with the resolution once it passed. These countries also tried to use Cuba as a vehicle to display their ability to stand up to U.S. pressure, but none did so as successfully and steadfastly as Mexico.

President-elect Gustavo Díaz Ordaz explained the nuances of Mexico’s foreign policy and its relationship to the United States in a November 12, 1964 conversation with President Johnson. He stated:

There was considerable advantage when the issues at stake were not great if Mexico could continue to demonstrate its political independence and divergence on relatively minor issues. While divergence on relatively unimportant matters might at times create temporary discomfiture they also demonstrated that the American States did in fact enjoy independence.\(^{48}\)

Díaz Ordaz was attempting to convince Johnson that Mexico’s stance was to both countries’ advantage: it demonstrated that the United States was not an international bully, and it allowed the Mexican government to appear autonomous. By decreasing the appearance of U.S. pressure, such a stance also suggested that the countries that did follow the OAS resolution did so of their own volition, not because the United States forced them to comply. A few months later, President Díaz Ordaz saw fit to reiterate to

\(^{47}\) “Latin American Reactions to Developments In and With Respect to Cuba” 18 July 1961, National Security Estimates, NSF, Box 8, LBJ Library.

\(^{48}\) “Memorandum of Conversation: Mexican-Cuban Relations,” 12 Nov 1964, Country File, NSF, Box 61, LBJ Library.
President Johnson that Mexico would support the U.S. on important issues, but “would never be a supine friend ‘on its knees’ before [the] dominating will of the U.S.”49 The President’s use of such graphic language suggests that he resented U.S. intervention in Mexican foreign policy, and wanted to present a strong, masculine image to the world.

The Mexican press celebrated the government’s independent stance in its coverage of the 1964 OAS conference. In the runner above the title on page one of the July 23, 1964 edition of Excelsior, the editors advertised “Opposing Theses of Sánchez Gavito [the Mexican ambassador to the OEA] and [U.S. Secretary of State] Dean Rusk.”50 The front-page article quoted Sánchez Gavito as stating: “The interventions and discussions undertaken until these moments confirm that we are in the minority, but the government that I am honored to represent has absolute security in the judgment of history.”51 The paper ran the article about Mexico’s defense of Cuba alongside another about Rusk’s warning to Castro, contrasting the two country’s attitudes toward Cuba. The article about Mexico contained further quotes from Sánchez Gavito, emphasizing the historical importance of Mexico’s stance: “We have defended the prestige of Mexican international policy.” The extremely positive press treatment and the ambassador’s statements clearly indicate that the Mexican government used the Cuba situation as an opportunity to enhance Mexico’s international reputation for political independence.

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49 “Telegram from Ambassador Freeman to Department of State,” 17 Feb 1965, Country File, NSF, Box 62, LBJ Library.


Befriending Castro

Mexico’s cordial relations with Cuba helped maintain internal political stability in another way—by discouraging Fidel Castro to include Mexico among his targets for his hemisphere-wide revolutionary campaign. Ever since Castro’s second Declaration of Havana in February 1962, the Cuban government had openly pursued a policy of encouraging armed revolution throughout Latin America.\(^{52}\) Castro vowed to assist violent revolutionary movements across the hemisphere, and provided arms, money, and training to groups throughout the Americas. The 1964 OAS resolution only increased Castro’s determination to spread his style of revolution among the nations that contributed to Cuba’s isolation. However, Castro took great care to note Mexico’s exemption from his revolutionary campaign: “With the government of Mexico, we are disposed to commit ourselves to maintain a policy subjected to norms, inviolable norms of respect of the sovereignty of each country and of not meddling in the internal affairs of any country.”\(^{53}\) Castro portrayed his relationship with the Mexican government as a reciprocal one: each one respected the other, and promised not to interfere in the other’s business.

Castro seized the opportunity to demonstrate his respect for the Mexican government’s sovereignty at the peak of internal unrest in Mexico City. Had Castro wanted to encourage revolutionary activity in Mexico, the 1968 student movement would have been the perfect chance. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, the Mexican government did not denounce a single instance of Cuban support for dissident groups.\(^{54}\) Furthermore,

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\(^{52}\) *Cinco documentos* (Havana: Instituto Cubano de Libro, 1971).

\(^{53}\) Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria de la Dirección Nacional del Partido Unido de la Revolución Socialista Cubana (ed.), *Obra Revolucionaria*, n. 18 (1964), 19.

\(^{54}\) Covarrubias, “Cuba and Mexico: Mutual Nonintervention.”
none of the leaders of the movement who requested political asylum did so at the Cuban embassy, and the Cuban government declined to boycott the Olympic Games held in Mexico City mere days after the Tlatelolco massacre. The CIA sent a memorandum to National Security Advisor Walter Rostow a few days after the massacre, stating that no conclusive evidence existed of foreign involvement in the student riots. While the lack of evidence of Cuban involvement in the student movement does not definitively prove that Castro did not have a hand in it, it does suggest that any support he offered to the rioters was insubstantial enough to result invisible. The Mexican government’s relationship with Castro gave him a significant reason to promote stability, rather than instability, in the region.

A Foot in the Door

The final reason that the Mexican government maintained relations with Cuba is because the U.S. government secretly endorsed its decision to do so. Government officials at the highest levels in multiple member countries of the Organization of American States agreed that it could be advantageous to allow Mexico to maintain relations with Cuba. During a phone conversation on November 12, 1964, Dean Rusk advised President Lyndon B. Johnson not to belabor the Cuba issue with Mexican President-elect Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Rusk told Johnson: “During our Foreign Ministers meeting in late July, a number of us—Brazil and others—talked about the practical

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55 Mario Ojeda Gómez, “Las relaciones de México con el régimen revolucionario cubano.”

desirability of having one Latin American embassy there if possible.” The top official in the US State Department described Mexico’s connections to Cuba as desirable—not dangerous, not tolerable even, but *desirable*.

Johnson apparently heeded the Secretary of State’s advice, and came to an agreement with Díaz Ordaz about relations with Cuba. In 1967, US Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico, Henry Dearborn, referred to an “informal understanding” between the governments of Mexico and the United States. Dearborn had learned upon arrival at his post that officials “at the highest levels” in both countries agreed that Mexico should “maintain relations with Cuba so one OAS country can have [a] foot in [the] door which might sometime be helpful.” Rusk’s statement to the President and Dearborn’s telegram to the Secretary of State both indicate that policymakers in the Johnson administration actually encouraged their counterparts in Mexico to defy the 1964 OAS resolution. This is not to say that the Mexican government maintained relations with Cuba because US officials told it to do so; rather, it shows that U.S. leaders responded favorably to the decision that the Mexican government had already made.

One possible reason the historical record has missed this fact is that Mexican officials demanded strict secrecy from the Americans with whom they collaborated. In a memorandum to President Johnson in February 1964, Dean Rusk stated:

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57 Telephone conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dean Rusk. Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Recordings of Telephone Conversations-White House Series, Tape WH6411.18: Dean Rusk, 9:40 a.m., PNO 6342.


59 Ibid.
We hope Mexico will continue to use its key political and geographic position to help control Castro/Communism. Mexico is very sensitive about publicizing its cooperation and we have carefully avoided any public comment on Mexican control measures. (underline in original)\(^{60}\)

As the Mexican government’s efforts to aid the United States in its campaign against Cuba clearly contradicted Mexican public rhetoric about self-determination and non-intervention, it made perfect sense that government officials would want to keep all cooperation with the US top secret.

**Conclusion**

The government of Mexico made a strategic decision when it decided to place itself in the middle of the Cold War battle between Cuba and the rest of the Americas. Presidents López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz knew that by maintaining diplomatic relations with Cuba, they were establishing Mexico as the default thoroughfare for Castro’s quest to spread revolutions across the hemisphere, and risking political and economic retaliation from the United States. However, closer examination reveals that these potential problems posed little actual danger to the Mexican government. Castro’s gratitude toward Mexico discouraged him from supporting any revolutionary activities within the country, and instead made him complicit in supporting the PRI regime. Furthermore, while some elements of the United States government resented Mexico’s

\(^{60}\) “Memorandum for the President,” 18 Feb 1964, Country File, NSF, Box 61, LBJ Library.
connections to Cuba, more powerful leaders in the executive branch secretly encouraged the Mexican government to maintain relations.

The determining factor in the Mexican government’s decision to flaunt the OAS resolution and maintain diplomatic relations with Cuba was the internal political situation. The PRI was a coalition-based governing party that claimed to have revolutionary origins, and its leaders were determined to hold the group together. The Cuba issue had the potential to divide the party between the left and the right, and popular leaders like Lázaro Cárdenas appeared willing to leave the coalition if the government ignored their demands. The Mexican government feared that if it cut relations with Cuba, it would lose the liberal wing of the party, and likely receive heavy criticism from both sides for bowing to U.S. pressure. The government had to strike a balance, and following an “independent” foreign policy seemed the best way to do it.

Presidents López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz took a calculated risk, one that apparently paid off handsomely. The Mexican government was able to hold its coalition together, thereby encouraging internal political stability. By rejecting the OAS resolution, López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz bolstered their reputations for independence and self-determination. The Mexican government’s relationship with Castro encouraged him to promote stability, rather than instability, in Mexican territory. Finally, a secret agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments to monitor Castro’s activities neutralized the threat of U.S. retaliations. Adolfo López Mateos and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz proved themselves masters of the diplomatic high-wire, using their skills on the international stage to satisfy their audiences at home.
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Exception to the Rule?
The Johnson Administration and the Panama Canal

Chapter in Mitchell Lerner, ed., Looking Back at LBJ
(Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, June 2005).

Mark Atwood Lawrence

History has given Lyndon Johnson low marks for his administration’s performance in coping with the transformation of the Third World during his years in office. The powerful assertion of nationalist grievances during the 1960s demanded creativity and flexibility, as U.S. national security increasingly depended upon aligning the country with global forces of sociopolitical change. Instead, historians have argued, Johnson responded with rigidity in thought and action, embracing a Manichean understanding of the Cold War and propping up the status quo wherever it was sagging. LBJ was “aware of change” in the international arena but was “slow to discard early Cold War assumptions and unsure how to deal with new realities,” writes one scholar with characteristic disdain.¹

Johnson inspires particular criticism with respect to Latin America, where scholars have contrasted his administration’s performance unfavorably with the more sophisticated policies of the Kennedy years. To be sure, many commentators argue that John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress has been overrated as a departure toward a more constructive U.S. relationship with Latin America.² But few dispute that LBJ squandered whatever promise the Alliance possessed and left behind a heavy-handed policy based on militarism, narrow anticommunism, and naked economic exploitation. During the 1960s, asserts one critic, “American leaders moved rapidly from the subtler ways of the alliance to the harsher means of social control, especially during the administration of Lyndon

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Johnson.” Under Johnson, adds another, the focus of U.S. policy shifted from “development” to “stability,” which became Washington’s “holy grail” for a decade. In that elusive quest, the administration ordered 23,000 U.S. troops into the Dominican Republic in 1965, supported military coups in Brazil (1964), Bolivia (1964), and Argentina (1966), and generally hardened U.S. attitudes toward sociopolitical change throughout the region.

This pattern was not, however, without its exceptions. Above all, the Johnson administration’s approach to Panama contrasts strikingly with its general performance in the Western hemisphere. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, U.S. policymakers grew increasingly alarmed as Panama experienced the same kind of political and social turmoil that gripped much of Latin America. Protecting U.S. interests in the country, especially control over the Panama Canal, ranked as one of Washington’s highest regional priorities throughout the Johnson years. At first, the administration responded to Panamanian unrest just as it answered similar challenges elsewhere – with diplomatic rigidity, manipulation of local politics, and force. Over time, however, Washington developed rare flexibility and imagination in its approach to Panama. On December 18, 1964, the president stunned the world by announcing that Washington would renegotiate the 1903 treaties under which the United States operated the canal and dominated the surrounding 500-square-mile Canal Zone. Those treaties, lopsided arrangements rudely imposed on Panama during the era of Theodore Roosevelt’s “big stick” diplomacy, had caused tension between Washington and Panamanian nationalists for half a century. Now, Johnson proclaimed, the United States was prepared for sweeping changes. The president declared U.S. willingness to “recognize the sovereignty of Panama” over the Canal Zone and, more generally, to seek an arrangement that was “just and fair and right” to both countries.

Thus began the process that resulted fourteen years later in a new treaty and thirty-five years later in the official transfer of the canal to Panama, a process that lasted far longer than Johnson could have imagined but ultimately fulfilled his vision of a

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reconfigured U.S.-Panamanian relationship. At the handover ceremony on December 14, 1999, Jimmy Carter received the lion’s share of credit for bringing the negotiations to fruition in 1978 – a triumph of statesmanship in the face of fierce conservative resistance. Johnson’s name was scarcely mentioned. Yet LBJ was the leader who had originally placed treaty-revision on the U.S. agenda, a remarkable gesture at a time of mounting skepticism in Washington about the possibility of achieving U.S. objectives in Latin America through accommodating local demands for change.

Why did the administration take such an exceptional step in Panama? The question merits attention partly because Johnson’s decision marked a watershed in U.S.-Panama relations and in the history of the canal. Even if the president failed to attain his objective during his term in office, his approach to the negotiations helped set the stage for dramas that played out in later years. Johnson’s dealings with Panama also command scholarly inquiry because they illuminate the broader U.S. approach to the Cold War during the 1960s. Johnson’s response to Panamanian unrest in early 1964, his first foreign-policy test after taking office, revealed patterns of behavior that would persist throughout his administration, above all LBJ’s cultivation of a tough image and his careful management of political and bureaucratic adversaries. Even more revealing than the continuities, however, are the discontinuities between the administration’s behavior in Panama and its performance with respect to other nationalist challenges. The Panama case sets in relief the rigidity and conservatism of Johnson’s general approach by illuminating a peculiar set of circumstances in which he was open to a flexible, creative, and even concessionary policy.

This essay argues that the administration followed such a course in Panama on the basis of three calculations it made over the course of 1964 – a constellation of judgments that it was unable to make with respect to other Third World trouble spots. First, Johnson concluded that he could manage the political risks associated with a policy of accommodation in Panama. Second, the administration calculated that ceding some rights in the Canal Zone, far from a sign of caving in to America’s leftist enemies, would in fact help reduce the danger of radicalism in Panama by strengthening the rightist oligarchy that had served U.S. interests for decades. Third, the president determined that the bureaucracies most deeply invested in existing Canal Zone arrangements, especially
the U.S. military, would not stand in the way of a new policy departure. Each calculation marked a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the transformation of U.S. policy in the months before Johnson’s speech. Only after assuring himself in each and every way—political, geopolitical, and bureaucratic—did the president offer to renegotiate. That gesture, ostensibly one of the most forward-looking and generous U.S. foreign-policy decisions of the Cold War era, was, then, rooted in the same caution and conservatism that characterized Johnson-era policymaking toward the Third World more generally. Confident that generosity would cost him nothing at home and would strengthen the repressive forces of order in Panama, the president embraced an exceptional policy—an exception that proves the rule.

The importance of being tough

On January 7, 1964, American students hoisted the U.S. flag up the flagpole outside Balboa High School near the Pacific end of the Canal Zone, a deliberate violation of agreements specifying where the stars and stripes could be flown in the U.S.-dominated strip of territory. As school let out two days later, at least 150 Panamanian students marched to the school intent on responding by running their nation’s colors up the flagpole. The ensuing confrontation led to a scuffle that injured several students and may have resulted in the tearing of the Panamanian flag. The marchers vacated the zone, but news of the clash spread quickly. Before the evening was out, rioting had erupted along a two-mile stretch of the Canal Zone border. Denouncing decades of U.S. domination, some 2,000 Panamanians peppered the Canal Zone police with debris, smashed windows, and set fire to U.S. property. A 20-year-old Panamanian student died as police shifted from tear gas to bullets to keep the mob out of the zone. Two hours into the fray, with canal police buckling, troops of the U.S. Southern Command went into action. Casualties mounted as U.S. snipers exchanged fire with armed rioters. By the time the Panamanian government called out its Guardia Nacional to restore order on January 13, four U.S. soldiers and 21 Panamanians were dead, and more than 100 on each side lay injured.5

5 For accounts of “flag riots” and their background, see William J. Jorden, Panama Odyssey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 38-53; Alan L. McPherson, Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin
The damage reached far beyond the streets of Panama. After the first night of rioting, Panamanian President Roberto Chiari suspended his country’s diplomatic relations with the United States. In a radio address, Chiari demanded an end to the rioting but declared that Panama would renew relations only if Washington agreed to renegotiate the canal treaties. Some U.S. officials suspected that the Panamanian leader, under mounting pressure before elections scheduled for May, was merely posturing to bolster his nationalist credentials and predicted that he would back down before seriously damaging relations with Washington. Chiari was, after all, hardly a radical. The president represented the deeply conservative oligarchy that had long cultivated close U.S. ties and run the country in the interests of the handful of families that dominated Panama. But Chiari showed no sign of giving in as the hours passed. On the contrary, he pledged that Panama’s U.N. delegation would make a “vigorous denunciation” of U.S. “aggression” against his country. “I also want to promise the Panamanian people solemnly,” he declared, “that my government will exhaust all recourses to carry out all measures to appeal to all possible organizations in order to obtain justice for the Republic of Panama once and for all and that national honor will suffer no loss whatsoever, and that the blood of the martyrs who perished today will not have been shed in vain.”

He was equally categorical in a phone conversation with Johnson, demanding “complete revision” of the canal treaties to curtail U.S. privileges. Chiari reminded Johnson that President Kennedy had pledged in 1961 to review the treaties, but that the promise had gone unfulfilled. Panama, he declared, would wait no longer.

Some powerful voices in the United States expressed a degree of sympathy for Panamanian complaints, blaming Americans in the Canal Zone for sparking the crisis and urging U.S. generosity. Among major newspapers, the Washington Post made the point most stridently. Balboa High students had done “their country about as much injury as it was in their capacity to accomplish,” the Post asserted. To remedy U.S.-Panamanian relations, the paper urged the Johnson administration to offer concessions including an

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*American Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), chapter 3; and Roberto N. Méndez, *Panama 9 de enero de 1964: Qué Pasó y Por Qué* (Panama City: Imprenta de la Universidad de Panamá, 1999).

6 Panama City to State Department, 10 Jan. 1964, box 64, National Security File (NSF), Country File (CF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL).

7 Transcript of phone conversation, Johnson with Chiari, 10 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL. For analysis of Panamanian decisions, see McPherson, *Yankee No!*, chapter 3.
increase in Panama’s share of canal revenues and a reduction in disparities between salaries paid to American and Panamanian canal workers. Similar ideas percolated through government agencies, where few officials had any fondness for the “Zonians.” In one of its first analyses of the riots, the Central Intelligence Agency complained that the Zonians had “fought every reasonable concession” to Panama over the years and were at it again, this time by flagrantly violating rules that had been painstakingly negotiated about the display of national flags. At the State Department, the bureau for Panamanian affairs hurriedly drafted a list of concessions that Washington might offer to repair relations: redistribution of revenues, concession of some U.S. control over commercial activities in the zone, and return of unused sections of the zone to Panamanian authority. On these points, asserted Lansing Collins, chief of the Panamanian office, “there is some negotiating room.”

At the highest echelon of power, however, Johnson and his closest advisers had little interest in such proposals. To be sure, the president accepted that Americans had provoked the riots and blamed “our damn fool police” for starting the shooting. But Johnson saw numerous reasons to reject Chiari’s demands. For one, the president viewed the riots as a test of U.S. resolve to resist communist subversion. Despite widespread acknowledgement that Americans had initiated the crisis, intelligence reports suggested that Panamanian leftists had immediately seized on the flagpole incident to stir up trouble. The CIA named specific institutions – especially the “communist-infiltrated” Instituto Nacional, a high school near the border of the Canal Zone – as seedbeds of radicalism. Similarly, it pinpointed individuals – the “communist student leader” Victor Avila and the “pro-Castro” National Assembly delegate Thelma King, among others – as probable instigators of the riots. Johnson readily embraced the theory of communist responsibility. “Kids started it and the communists got into it,” the president asserted on

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9 CIA (Panama City) to various posts, 10 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
10 Gordon Chase to Bundy, 11 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL. The goal of redistributing canal revenues attracted the most support. In 1963, the canal yielded $5 million in net income, of which Panama received $1.9 million. See Walter LaFeber, The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 133.
11 Telephone conversation (telcon), Johnson with Russell, 10 Jan. 1964, WH6401.10, PNO 26, LBJL.
12 CIA cable 95543, Panama City to White House Situation Room, 10 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL; CIA cable SFI017, Panama City to White House Situation Room, 10 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
the first day of the crisis. If the flag dispute had not come along, he said, “they would have kicked [the rioting] off in some other way, some other time.”

U.S. fear of communist activity escalated in the following days. Intelligence reports suggested not only that “Castroites” and communists had penetrated the Panamanian government, but also that Fidel Castro was preparing to send weapons into the country as part of a coordinated assault on U.S. interests. So seriously did Secretary of State Dean Rusk take these reports that he instructed U.S. diplomats remaining in Panama to begin planning joint U.S.-Panamanian military action to intercept Cuban arms. Meanwhile, the CIA reported that Panama’s tiny communist party, the Partido del Pueblo, was growing bolder in its attempts to capitalize on the unrest. Communist leaders, including “persons who have visited behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains, have made trips to Cuba, and have been given training in guerrilla warfare by the Castro regime,” were trying to maintain “strong prominent positions” during the crisis “with the eventual objective of assuming an important role in the government,” the CIA reported. By the first week of February, that nightmare scenario seemed to be coming true. “If Panama maintains its present position vis a vis the United States for one month more,” claimed one wildly alarmist report, “it is probable that Panama will be the second socialist country in America.” Already, the CIA alleged, the Partido del Pueblo had gained control over the government, dictating “practically every idea expressed by President Roberto Chiari” during the crisis.13

Johnson and his advisers concluded that the situation demanded toughness from Washington. To respond in any other way, they believed, would only embolden the radicals by creating the impression that the United States would back down under threat of violence. “I think the communists are going to cause trouble every place in this country they can,” Johnson told Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield on the first day of the crisis. “I think we’ve got to get a little bit hard with them,” the president added.14

U.S. policymakers also manifested conventional Cold War fears that softness in one

14 Telcon, Johnson with Mansfield, 10 Jan. 1964, WH6401.11, PNO 12, LBJL.
country would encourage problems elsewhere. Trouble already seemed to be brewing. In Mexico City, U.S. diplomats reported on January 11 that the Communist Party and other leftist groups were taking to the streets in support of their Panamanian counterparts. In Argentina, leftists proposed sending arms to help Panamanians defend themselves against a U.S. crackdown. Meanwhile, U.S. diplomats watched as left-leaning newspapers in Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and several other Latin American countries declared their sympathy for Panama’s cause.15 “The goddamn propaganda is all against us, and it’s just everywhere,” Johnson fretted.16

This standard Cold War calculus intersected with a second reason for the administration’s rejection of Chiari’s renegotiation demand: Johnson’s appraisal of his political needs. Many scholars of the 1960s have noted that Johnson, coming to power abruptly after the assassination of his predecessor, was uncertain in foreign affairs and feared, even more than other Cold War presidents, that missteps would cost him politically.17 The risks seemed especially grave in Latin America. U.S. politicians found advantage in the early 1960s in fingerling Castro as the instigator of unrest throughout the hemisphere. Any move to appease Panamanian agitators therefore risked exposing the administration to damaging charges of playing into Cuban hands. Democratic Congressman Daniel Flood of Pennsylvania, Washington’s most outspoken defender of U.S. control over the canal, provided a taste of the rhetorical stakes when he accused the Kennedy administration of presiding over “another Munich” in 1962 by allowing the Panamanian flag to fly in the zone.18 But even without Castro, Panama would have been a risky place for compromise. Since its construction in the first years of the century, the Panama Canal held special symbolic power for many Americans. Johnson knew that the Zonians and their allies in Congress stood vigilant for any lack of U.S. determination to guard U.S. rights in the zone and would do their best to make any inattentive president pay a political price. Johnson also saw another reason for toughness. As the media

15 Mexico City to State Department, 11 Jan. 1964, box 2560, Central State Department File (CSDF), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); U.S. Information Agency report, “Initial Foreign Reaction to the Panama Situation,” 13 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
16 Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 22 Jan. 1964, WH6401.19, PNO 2, LBJL.
repeatedly pointed out during the flag crisis, Panama represented his first foreign-policy challenge as president. He knew that the nation and the world would judge him by how he handled it.\(^19\)

Public opinion gave him good reason to believe that a hard line was the safest path. Approximately 400 pieces of mail to the White House ran between ten and fifteen to one in favor of a “firm U.S. position,” according to a memorandum prepared for the president on January 11.\(^20\) Gallup poll results a few days later showed similar tendencies. Of the 64 percent of Americans who were aware of the Panama issue, almost half urged a “firm policy,” while only 9 percent favored concessions to Panamanian demands.\(^21\) Such lopsided numbers impressed Johnson’s political advisers, who had their eyes on the November presidential election. Richard Scammon, chief of the Commerce Department’s census bureau and a Democratic political analyst, told Johnson he was “more than a little concerned with the potential trouble which Panama could cause us in November.” The issue could cause “trouble, crises, problems, and difficulties ad infinitum ad nauseum,” asserted Scammon, adding that concessions on the canal could give the Republicans their “first real solid muscled hit at the Administration.” The adviser warned that Americans might turn against Johnson if he was seen “getting pushed around by a small country about an area which every grade school history book features with an American flag, a snapshot of Teddy Roosevelt, and an image of gallant engineers overcoming the mosquito.”\(^22\)

A chorus of conservative voices reinforced the administration’s sense of political danger in Panama. A State Department survey found a “general consensus” in Congress for a “firm U.S. stand against Panamanian demands on the Canal,” with some members even urging a “U.S. show of force.”\(^23\) A few liberals, sharing a sense that the United States was partially to blame for problems in Panama, struck a note of flexibility. Senate


\(^{20}\) White House memo, “Panama – Telegrams from the Public,” 12 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.

\(^{21}\) Figures cited in LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 143-144.

\(^{22}\) Scammon’s memo to White House aide Ralph Dungan, dated 17 Jan. 1964, is cited in LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 143-144.

\(^{23}\) State Department to Panama City, 11 Jan. 1964, box 2560, CSDF, NARA. Congress was already on record as a strong opponent of change in the Canal Zone. In non-binding resolution in 1959, Congress had voted 380-12 against Eisenhower’s proposals to permit the Panamanian flag to fly in the Canal Zone.
Majority Leader Mansfield, for instance, insisted that the “first thing we need is to keep our shirts on…. We are,” he said, “a great and powerful nation, but we are not a nation of bullies.”

But such comments paled beside bold rhetoric from Johnson’s Republican adversaries, notably presidential aspirant Barry Goldwater. “That canal is ours, and we can’t have other governments taking our property away,” declared Goldwater, insisting that Johnson not “back down an inch.”

Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen charged, “We are in the amazing position of having a country with one-third the population of Chicago kicking us around. If we crumble in Panama,” he stated, “the reverberations of our actions will be felt around the world.”

Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal*, in contrast to liberal dailies, depicted concession as the path of softness and naivety. “This disgraceful business ought to be a sharp reminder to all the sentimentalists who believe that we can uplift Latin America, and be loved for it, simply by handing out billions of [Alliance for Progress] dollars,” the *Journal* insisted.

Interwoven with Johnson’s geostrategic and political calculations was a third reason for Johnson’s belief that he must respond with firmness: his desire to cut the figure of a tough, manly leader. As historians Robert D. Dean and Fredrik Logevall have argued, Johnson worked hard to cultivate a reputation as a muscular president who would stand his ground no matter the cost.

During the Panama crisis, Johnson frequently boasted of his toughness, telling Russell on the first day of the crisis, for example, that he had been “cold and hard and tough as hell” with Chiari. On one occasion, the president went further by casting himself in the role of the lone stalwart against State Department pressure to compromise. Following a meeting with department officials on January 22, Johnson bragged to Russell that he “was the only man in the room who said no” to a gesture of compromise. He was “not one goddamn bit” prepared for such a move. “By God,” Johnson insisted, “I ain’t going to do it. I wasn’t raised in that school.”

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26 Quoted in Jorden, *Panama Odyssey*, 74.
29 Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 22 Jan. 1964, WH6401.19, PNO 2, LBJL.
LBJ’s closest confidant in the early months of his administration, affirmed the president’s sense of machismo. The Georgian praised Johnson for resisting the “weeping sob sisters” in the State Department and for giving the American people vigorous leadership. “The American people have been crying for someone that had some of the elements of Old Hickory Jackson in him,” Russell told his friend. “Somebody … has just got to take the bull by the horns one of these days and just play the part of old Andrew Jackson.” Johnson soaked in the compliment without comment.

Motivated in all these ways, the Johnson administration laid down the policy that it would maintain over the following three months as the two countries struggled to repair their relationship. On the one hand, Johnson assured Chiari that once diplomatic ties had been renewed, Washington would talk with Panamanian leaders about the full range of problems that divided them. “In the appropriate circumstances and when peace has been restored, we will give sympathetic welcome to discussion of all troubles and problems with our Panamanian friends,” LBJ specified in instructions for a delegation of U.S. officials dispatched to Panama in the first hours of the crisis. On the other hand, the president sternly rebuffed Chiari’s key demand. Washington would never “negotiate under pressure of violence and breach in relations,” he instructed his emissaries. The delegation was to inform Chiari that his demand for an immediate promise to revise the treaties was “unacceptable.” “If we go in there and start opening up [the] treaty under those conditions, we’d be the laughing stock of the world,” Johnson said.

While Panamanians were bound to see the U.S. position as yet another refusal to seek meaningful change, Johnson considered it fair: Once Chiari backed down, Washington would be reasonable. But the Panamanian view was closer to the mark. Although the administration dangled the carrot of eventual cooperation throughout the three-month diplomatic standoff, Johnson was wary of giving any hint that the United States would make significant concessions and strongly emphasized the firmness of the U.S. rebuff to Chiari’s principal demand. Fearing that the Panamanians might get the wrong idea from the softer side of his policy, Johnson took comfort in the fact that Tom

30 Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 10 Jan. 1964, WH6401.10, PNO 26, LBGL; Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 10 Jan. 1964, WH6401.11, PNO 2, LBGL.
31 Johnson to USCINCSO, 11 Jan. 1964, box 63, NSF, CF, LBGL.
32 Telcon, Johnson with Bundy, 11 Jan. 1964, WH6401.12, PNO 2, LBGL.
Mann, the State Department’s assistant secretary for Inter-American Affairs, led the U.S. delegation to meet with Chiari in Panama City. The president praised Mann as a “tough guy,” who, in contrast to many State Department officials, could be counted upon to state the U.S. position firmly.\(^{33}\) Indeed, the president had appointed Mann to his position in 1963 with the expectation that the fellow Texan, a staunch anti-communist skeptical of the Alliance for Progress, would give U.S. policy in Latin America a new vigor. Even with Mann in charge, though, the president worried that the vague assurance of future discussions conceded too much. “I’m afraid that we’re going a bit further than we ought to go,” Johnson complained to Russell. “It seems to me, that we’re kind of giving in … and responding at the point of a pistol.” The frustrating thing, Johnson said, was that the United States could not get away with a total rejection of Panamanian overtures. “I don’t see how you can keep from listening,” he reflected.\(^{34}\)

**Mastering the political risks**

With Johnson and Chiari adamant about their positions, stalemate set in. The Mann delegation failed to generate any progress toward a solution and left Panama on January 13. The focus of the dispute then shifted to a new forum, the Inter-American Peace Commission, a body of the Organization of American States designed to mediate disputes between member nations. The results were the same. A five-member Commission team produced a flurry of optimism on January 15 by issuing a communiqué inviting the two governments to reestablish relations and announcing that both had agreed “to discuss without limitation” all differences between their countries. The pitfall was that the Spanish-language text used the verb “negociar” where the English version used “to discuss” and “negociaciones formales” in place of “discussions.”\(^{35}\) Johnson immediately balked at language that appeared to commit the United States to renegotiation. A State Department spokesperson quickly pointed out the difference between “negociation” and “discussion” and insisted that the United States was open only to “discussions.” The deal unraveled. By the end of the month, the Commission abandoned its efforts.

\(^{33}\) Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 10 Jan. 1964, WH6401.11, PNO 12, LBJL.

\(^{34}\) Telcon, Johnson with Russell, 11 Jan. 1964, WH6401.12, PNO 1, LBJL.

\(^{35}\) State Department circular, 20 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
U.S. insistence on the communiqué’s wording reflected Johnson’s fears of exposing his administration to political attack for weakness in Panama. Some U.S. diplomats, more concerned with Cold War geopolitics than electoral considerations, believed that Washington should accept the OAS formula in the interest of defusing a dangerous situation in Panama. Most significantly, Mann backed the Commission’s communiqué, apparently fearful that a prolonged confrontation would increase the chance of a leftist takeover in Panama. In a phone conversation with the president, Mann expressed hope that the OAS plan would alleviate an “explosive” situation. “We [need to] give time for tempers to cool and sit down and look at these things [the treaties],” said Mann, reflecting the State Department view that the United States could make concessions without sacrificing fundamental U.S. interests in the zone. “There are things we can credibly do,” advised Mann. In any case, the assistant secretary suggested that history would judge the United States not by the words it used – “negotiate” or “discuss” – but by its deeds. To this assertion, the annoyed president replied that the administration’s political fortunes, like it or not, rested on words. “You may not be around to judge [U.S. deeds] if they think we’re sitting down to revise some treaties,” Johnson warned Mann, implying that the administration might be voted out of office if it failed to take account of political realities that demanded toughness.36 In the president’s mind, electoral politics trumped geopolitics when the two diverged.

Johnson’s approach served him well by the measure he considered most important. He received broad praise for his tough stand and, most importantly, felt little criticism from the right after the first days of the crisis. The State Department detected a “wide consensus” among U.S. newspapers in favor of the president’s approach.37 Hawkish Washington Post columnist Joseph Alsop gave Johnson an especially strong endorsement, contending that the Panama crisis provided “a striking and pretty encouraging demonstration of President Johnson’s approach to acute problems overseas.”38 In Congress, the president’s achievement was evident not so much in forthright praise as in the thing that mattered more to him: the near total absence of criticism. By showing unrelenting toughness, Johnson had succeeded in denying his

36 Telcon, Johnson with Mann, 14 Jan. 1964, WH6401.14, PNO 1, LBJL.
critics an exploitable issue. The president probably also benefited from his efforts to involve Republican leaders in decision-making. At a White House meeting on January 19, for example, Johnson carefully solicited advice from prominent senators. Predictably, the president’s Democratic allies embraced his position, asserting that any injustices in the U.S.-Panamanian relationship could be adjusted through discussions at a later date. On the other side, Dirksen found it impossible to outflank Johnson on the right. The minority leader merely urged the president to stick with the policy he had already staked out.\textsuperscript{39}

Buoyed by broad support, the White House remained wary of any formula for resolving the crisis that could be interpreted as U.S. appeasement of Panama. At Panamanian request, the OAS Council, the organization’s committee of ambassadors, took up the controversy and developed a series of proposals during February and March. Repeatedly, the Johnson administration balked at language hinting at U.S. willingness to renegotiate. At one point, the president even disavowed a formula that the State Department had prepared and secretly handed to the OAS as a proposal that would surely win U.S. favor. That plan went beyond what Johnson was prepared to tolerate by specifying that the two sides would appoint special ambassadors “with sufficient powers to enter into agreements … including problems of existing treaties.”\textsuperscript{40} In a mid-March speech directed at his own bureaucracy as much as Panama City, Johnson made his position clear. “Press reports indicate that the government of Panama feels that the language which has been under consideration for many days commits the United States to a rewriting and to a revision of the 1903 treaty,” Johnson said. “We have made no such commitment and we would not think of doing so before diplomatic relations are resumed and unless a fair and satisfactory adjustment is agreed upon.”\textsuperscript{41} To drive home U.S. determination, the administration backed up its words with economic coercion. Secretary of State Rusk ordered U.S. diplomats to inform Panamanian officials that approval of new U.S. loans depended upon security for officials who would monitor disbursement.

\textsuperscript{39} Jorden, \textit{Panama Odyssey}, 73-4.
\textsuperscript{40} National Security Council study, “Panama Crisis – 1964,” box 1, National Security Council Histories, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{41} White House press release, “Remarks of the President,” 16 March 1964, box 65, NSF, CF, LBJL.
Panamanians, increasingly aware of economic instability caused by the break in relations, could hardly have missed the threat.\footnote{Brands, \textit{Wages of Globalism}, 39.}

U.S. tactics paid off during the first days of April. Although Chiari apparently secured a $5 million loan from Francisco Franco’s Spain, that sum was far too little to shore up Panama’s crumbling economy, and the government came under mounting pressure from the Panamanian elite to end the crisis.\footnote{Jorden is the only author to write of the Spanish loan but provides no citations. See Jorden, \textit{Panama Odyssey}, 70-1.} Well attuned to Chiari’s bind, Johnson met with senior advisers on April 1 to edit the latest OAS proposal to meet U.S. tastes. Two days later, the Panamanian government accepted that plan. The carefully worded document called for reestablishment of diplomatic relations and the appointment of special ambassadors “with sufficient powers to seek the prompt elimination of the causes of conflict between the two countries, without limitations or preconditions of any kind.” The deal specified that the ambassadors would aim for a “just and fair agreement which would be subject to the constitutional processes of each country.”\footnote{National Security Council study, “Panama Crisis – 1964,” box 1, National Security Council Histories, LBJL.} Chiari hailed the agreement, but there was little doubt about which side had prevailed. The word “negotiate” was nowhere to be found. Nor did the agreement set a timetable or specifically mention the canal or the possibility of treaty renegotiation.

Johnson exulted over his triumph, boasting of his consistency during the crisis. “Our insistence on talking without precondition was our first and last position,” Johnson bragged at the NSC meeting that formally approved the deal.\footnote{“Summary Record of National Security Council Meeting No. 526,” 3 April 1964, box 1, NSF, NSC Meetings File, LBJL.} Still, the president’s actions in his moment of victory reflected a lingering concern with political hazards. The White House made sure to publicize the presence of Republican congressmen at the decisive NSC session. More importantly, the administration selected a prominent Republican, Robert B. Anderson, as the U.S. special ambassador who would take charge of talks with Panama. Given LBJ’s sensitivities, Anderson was an ideal choice. A likeminded Texan with strong corporate connections, he promised to be a vigorous
defender of U.S. interests. The U.S. treasury secretary during the second Eisenhower administration, he would insulate Johnson from partisan attack.46

But the president probably had little cause for concern regardless of his choice. The resolution of the crisis won hearty approval across the political spectrum. William J. Jorden, a confidante of LBJ’s and later U.S. ambassador to Panama, recalls in his memoir that observers gave Johnson “an A, some an A+” for his handling of the crisis.47 Predictably, liberal newspapers applauded a deal that seemed to leave space for change.48 Meanwhile, conservatives offered little criticism, and some found reason for praise. In an editorial contrasting sharply with the sneering tone it had taken in January, the Wall Street Journal praised the president’s ability to hold firm while demonstrating a willingness to talk – a balancing act that the paper found more characteristic of tough-minded Republicans.49 The implication was clear. Johnson had successfully coopted his adversaries’ agenda. Indeed, it was no coincidence that the strongest criticism of the president’s Panama policy came from a fellow Democrat, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright. In a speech at the end of March, Fulbright berated Johnson for making the Panama crisis “a test of our bravery and will” and urged the administration to “go a little farther than half way in the search for a fair settlement.”50 There is no evidence that the president gave the intra-party attack much thought. That was not the kind of criticism that worried him.

Reappraising the Cold War in Panama

As the diplomatic crisis came to an end, then, the political dangers facing Johnson had lessened dramatically. The risk remained, of course, that the issue might reemerge to threaten his electoral chances in November. Unavoidably, the subject continued to attract media attention through the spring as the two sides determined how they would proceed.

46 In the available documentation, neither Johnson nor his advisers explicitly acknowledged this logic. But historians have repeatedly noted Johnson’s pattern of appointing Republicans to difficult and politically risky diplomatic assignments. Most famously, he re-appointed Henry Cabot Lodge as ambassador to Vietnam in 1965.
47 Jorden, Panama Odyssey, 91.
with the promised talks. Anderson traveled to Panama, and the chief Panamanian negotiator, prominent lawyer Jorge E. Illueca, flew to Washington for meetings with U.S. officials. But thereafter the administration succeeded in moving the matter exactly where it wanted it – safely onto the backburner. Bilateral talks during 1964 could have been held “in an igloo on the Arctic circle for all the attention they received from government or press,” Jorden recalls. In fact, the Johnson administration had little difficulty keeping the matter out of the spotlight since the Panamanian government was in no position to force the pace of the talks. The hard-fought Panamanian presidential election in May distracted the government from its preparations and, after the election of Marco Aurelio Robles as Chiari’s successor, produced so much turnover in Panamanian personnel that it would have been impossible to sustain momentum even if political leaders had tried. The Robles government, with a new cast of foreign-affairs officials, was not inaugurated until October, by which time the imminence of the U.S. election ruled out any new initiatives.

If the calendar cooperated, so did the Republicans. Even as Goldwater attacked Johnson on Berlin, Vietnam, and other trouble spots in mid-1964, he had little to say about Panama. In a string of bland policy statements from April to July, Republicans revealed their inability to find political leverage. Just after the restoration of U.S.-Panamanian relations, a Republican study group issued an innocuous report that largely endorsed the president’s policy. Relieved White House aide Gordon Chase applauded the paper’s “constructive, bipartisan approach.” The administration found more reassurance a week later when a meeting of Republican officials issued a similarly benign statement demanding that if there was to be a new canal treaty, it must “not be negotiated under the club” of violence or threats. Johnson could not have said it better himself. Nor did the Democrats have any reason to fear the canal issue as the November election drew closer. The Republican platform unveiled in July merely asserted the party’s determination to “reaffirm this nation’s treaty rights” while showing flexibility on some

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51 Jorden, Panama Odyssey, 94.
52 Chase to Bundy, 8 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
minor aspects of U.S. control. Again, it was a virtual restatement of the Democrats’ approach.

The declining political salience of the Panama issue created opportunities for Washington policymakers concerned with waging the Cold War in Latin America, rather than protecting the president’s political standing, to step to the fore – a critical moment in the evolution of U.S. policy. With the president’s political interests secure, the foreign policy bureaucracy gained freedom to explore policy options that had been out of the question at the beginning of the year. The result was an increasingly sophisticated view, shared among a widening circle of policymakers, that the United States could best wage the Cold War through precisely the opposite course from the one the president’s personal interests had dictated. By showing flexibility and generosity, they calculated, the United States could bolster its long-term interests by undercutting Panama’s left and enabling the Chiari and Robles governments to claim credit as true champions of Panamanian nationalism. To be sure, this reappraisal of the Cold War in Panama stood no chance of driving an immediate shift in U.S. policy. Through the November election, the president was determined to keep Panama out of the spotlight and to avoid any hint of weakness. But the geostrategic reappraisal provided a rationale for a dramatic change of policy that Johnson himself would find persuasive once he had achieved his sweeping electoral victory.

The shift rested on logic that a minority of U.S. officials, mainly within the State Department, had articulated as early as the first days of the diplomatic crisis. Assistant Secretary Mann, hardly a liberal, was among the most important exponents of the view that Washington should accommodate Chiari to some extent. Mann had little regard for Panamanian leaders, calling them “the most unreasonable people … you can imagine,” but he dissented strongly from the prevailing view that communism was the root of the problem. Communist activism was “not necessary to explain this outburst of anti-U.S. feeling which has spread to many leading Panamanians who have been friends of [the] U.S.,” Mann wrote during his trip to Panama two days after the riots started. In his

55 Telcon, Johnson with Mann, Moyers, 14 Jan. 1964, WH6401.14, PNO 1, LBJL.
56 Mann delegation to State Department, 11 Jan. 1964, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
view, unrest sprang not from an international conspiracy, but from genuine nationalism that ran across the Panamanian political spectrum. A study by the State Department’s Office of Intelligence and Research drew out the policy implications of this thinking, asserting that Chiari needed some sort of diplomatic victory if he was going to “keep a lid on the left.” Though Americans might not like Chiari, the paper continued, he might be the best that Washington could hope for under the circumstances; so intense was Panamanian nationalism that no alternative leader could take a stance on the canal different from Chiari’s and expect to last in power. The bottom line of such reasoning was clear. If Washington refused to budge on the canal, it risked destroying conservatives such as Chiari and opening the way for political instability and radicalization.

The clash between this view and Johnson’s approach during the diplomatic crisis encapsulated the dilemma U.S. policymakers confronted in the 1960s as they crafted policy toward Latin America. Was turmoil principally the result of Soviet-sponsored conspiracy against U.S. interests, or did it stem mainly from socioeconomic grievances that extended far beyond the organized left? Policy hung on the answer. In Panama, the dilemma weighed on U.S. policymakers as the diplomatic crisis dragged into spring 1964. If, as intelligence reports suggested, communists and Castroites had seized control over the Chiari government and driven it into confrontation with Washington, the best course lay in forcing Chiari to back down from his demand. If, as Mann urged, communist activity was more symptom than cause of Panama’s problems, the best course lay in making concessions calculated to enhance moderate political forces that would, over time, diminish the radicals’ appeal. Building up Chiari, in most respects an authoritarian figure of the type that had long served U.S. interests in Panama, might then prove a better solution than antagonizing him.

The latter view gradually became the dominant strand of U.S. thinking. The shift was possible mainly because of Johnson’s success in neutralizing Panama as a political liability and his conviction that the United States had prevailed in a Cold War test of wills. Having forced its opponent to back down, U.S. officials could be satisfied that any future negotiations would be conducted from a position of strength. The stick had been

57 Director of Intelligence and Research to Rusk, 31 Jan. 1964, box 65, NSF, CF, LBJL.
successfully deployed; now the carrot – which had never entirely disappeared as part of
Johnson’s policy during the diplomatic crisis – could be offered with less fear that
Washington’s opponents would underestimate its resolution. But these considerations by
themselves do not suffice to explain the shift in policy during 1964. Three more specific
calculations also helped to convince policymakers, including ultimately the president
himself, that calculated generosity offered the best way to bolster U.S. interests in
Panama.

First, U.S. officials, whatever their disagreements over communist strength back
in January, found increasing evidence later in the year that radicals posed no serious
threat in Panama. To gauge the left’s status, U.S. intelligence scrutinized a communist-
organized National Youth Congress held in Panama just as the diplomatic crisis was
coming to an end. The State Department’s Office of Intelligence and Research was
impressed not only by Chiari’s efforts to obstruct the event but also by the low attendance
and general lack of activism that it generated, failures that contrasted sharply with the
Partido del Pueblo’s enthusiasm for anti-American agitation just a few weeks earlier.
“The contrast provides further proof that the trouble potential of Panama’s Communists
and Castroists is greatest when their objectives merge with those of other groups in
society and focus on a genuinely popular cause,” the report asserted. In January, it
added, all segments of the Panamanian population had come together on the canal issue.
By March, however, the climate had changed, and “responsible Panamanians in and out
of government were not interested in aiding and abetting adventures of irresponsible
youths.”

Washington gained further confidence as the May 10 national election
approached. A detailed State Department report dated April 20 asserted that the Castro
regime “still had some appeal among a few diehards” but concluded that committed
communists, numbering only about 300, were in no position to seize power. The report
went on to give one of the most elaborate expressions yet of a view that was rapidly
becoming a consensus within the State Department: Communist influence in Panama
stemmed not from any significant base of support but from the left’s intermittent ability
to tap into grievances that ran beneath the surface of Panamanian life. Most importantly,

58 Director of Intelligence and Research to Rusk, 13 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
the left appealed to Panama’s disgruntled youth, a part of the population that the report described as “frustrated and discontented” due to the absence of opportunity for social advancement. Young Panamanians, the report continued, blamed Panama’s elite and the United States, which they tended to associate with “the system.” The study ridiculed ordinary Panamanians for expecting the United States to solve their problems for them. But it also indicated that Washington could help its cause by playing its hand carefully. “There is a large store of good will and admiration for the United States among the students and youth of Panama which, if diligently cultivated, can produce results favorable to the United States,” the study insisted.59 A White House memorandum picked up on this theme, asserting, “An unyielding U.S. position [on the canal treaty] would simply increase tensions in Panama, and make long-term arrangements more difficult.”60

The second consideration that led the Johnson administration to reappraise its Panama policy was its satisfaction with the conduct and outcome of the Panamanian election. Reassurance sprang partly from the conspicuous lack of leftist agitation in the days around the vote. The CIA feared the worst, asserting on May 7 that “all the elements for a serious explosion very damaging to the U.S. security interests” were present in Panama.61 Washington positioned a rapid-reaction force of 1,300 Marines off the Panamanian coast in case it was needed to reinforce the U.S. garrison in the Canal Zone. Two thousand more U.S.-based airborne troops prepared to intervene in the Canal Zone within ten hours of an emergency.62 But no major disturbances occurred. U.S. officials were also pleased with the election’s result. Panamanian law barred Roberto Chiari from running for a second term, setting up a race between his protégé, Marco Robles, and two rivals. One of those rivals, Juan de Arco Galindo, drew the bulk of his support from the same sector of the population that backed Chiari and Robles – elite Panamanians connected to the oligarchy. The other contender, Arnulfo Arias, was the twice-deposed president of Panama, an enigmatic populist with an authoritarian streak who had alternately repelled and intrigued Washington over the previous two decades. All three candidates campaigned on platforms emphasizing the need for new canal

59 State Department report, “PANAMA – Plan for Action from Present to October 1964,” 20 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
60 White House memo, “Panama,” 28 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
61 CIA memo, “The Panamanian Situation,” 7 May 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
62 Bundy to Johnson, 8 May 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
treaties and reform programs aimed at bringing advances to the mass of Panamanians. But in the end, the upper classes determined the outcome by closing ranks behind Robles, giving their candidate a narrow victory.

Washington policymakers hoped for a victory by one of the traditional conservatives and were relieved by Arias’ failure. Yet few U.S. officials initially had much regard for Robles, whom they feared would fall prey to leftist influences just as they believed Chiari had. Robles was “just as crooked as any other [political leader] in living memory in Panama,” the new U.S. ambassador, Jack Vaughn, reported following the election. Most alarming to Vaughn, Robles showed a “disconcerting readiness to cooperate with certain leftists.”63 As American officials learned more about Robles, however, their views shifted dramatically. Vaughn reported in June that the president-elect was working hard to combat the view among Americans that his desire to renegotiate the canal treaties amounted to “extremism and near-communism.”64 To the contrary, Robles cast that desire as part of a conservatively patriotic agenda that was not fundamentally anti-American. Vaughn was also impressed by Robles’ choice for foreign minister, Fernando Eleta, scion of an elite Panamanian family noted for its strong conservatism. The U.S. ambassador praised Eleta for his “very lively sense of the realities of Communist inroads” in Panama, while Eleta’s evident regard for the United States and for Franco’s Spain also boded well.65 As the new regime took office in October, opinion in Washington swung to outright enthusiasm. “Robles has pledged himself to [a] firm stand against communist agitation, in welcome contrast to his predecessor,” Vaughn reported. “All this looks good and I believe there is much on the plus side of the ledger, much more perhaps than we had any right to expect.”66 With such a reliable regime in power, the Johnson administration gained confidence that it could bargain with Panama with little risk of playing into leftist hands.

The Robles government was not the only institution in Panama that reassured Washington. During the middle months of 1964, U.S. officials came to appreciate Panama’s Guardia Nacional as another important source of anticommunist stability – the

63 Vaughn to State Department, 1 June 1964, box 2559, CSDF, NARA.
64 Vaughn to State Department, 10 July 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
65 Vaughn to State Department, 20 July 1964, box 2559, CSDF, LBJL.
66 Vaughn to State Department, 8 Oct. 1964, box 67, NSF, CF, LBJL.
third consideration that led the Johnson administration to reevaluate its Panama policy. During the January riots, U.S. officials had been disappointed by the guard’s timidity. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had regarded the force as a potentially significant ally for the United States and ordered the U.S. military commander in the Canal Zone to inform the Guardia that it could count on U.S. support in resisting a communist coup. But the Guardia showed little interest in playing the role scripted for it at the Pentagon. Chiari refused to call out the force until the end of the third day of rioting, and the guard evidently accepted its limited role without dissent. Even after it went into action, it disappointed some U.S. officials by refusing to detain suspected leftist agitators – a function that U.S. officials had come to expect paramilitary organizations to perform in Latin America.

By summer, however, U.S. opinion of the Guardia Nacional had changed dramatically. Around the time of the Panamanian election, U.S. diplomats repeatedly commented on the force’s surprisingly strong role in preventing any disturbance by the left while also positioning itself squarely behind Robles. The guard was “alert and capable,” reported Vaughn, who predicted the guard would make sure there was no repetition of the January riots on election day. When Panamanian leftists threatened to stage new anti-American demonstrations on the Fourth of July, U.S. embassy officials again took heart from the Guardia’s firmness. Guardsmen positioned themselves along the Canal Zone border to prevent incidents, prepared, as one U.S. diplomat phrased it, “to nip in [the] bud any action [to] create trouble.” The embassy was not disappointed. The force not only suppressed anti-American unrest but also sent a band and color guard to participate in the Americans’ holiday celebrations. Zonians showed their restored faith in the Guardia by giving the units a rousing ovation. To be sure, the guard had not achieved the independent role it would seize four years later, when its commander, Omar Torrijos, executed a coup that ended civilian rule. But the force’s actions over the course

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67 Telcon transcript, McNamara with O’Meara, 14 Jan. 1964, box 67, NSF, CF, LBJL.
68 See, for example, Mann to Martin, 30 Jan. 1964, box 65, NSF, CF, LBJL, and Martin to Mann, 30 Jan. 1964, box 65, NSF, CF, LBJL.
69 Vaughn to State Department, 1 June 1964, box 2559, CSDF, NARA.
70 Panama City to State Department, 2 July 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBJL.
71 Vaughn to State Department, 6 July 1964, box 2560, CSDF, NARA.
of 1964 pushed it back toward the center of national politics and regained Washington’s confidence.

The sea-level canal and the forging of consensus

Certain that Panamanian communism was in eclipse, pleased with Robles’ conservatism, and reassured by the resurgent Guardia Nacional, the Johnson administration steadily, if quietly, leaned toward a new policy of accommodation. The new mood manifested itself first in Washington’s efforts in the middle of the year to ease economic problems exacerbated by the diplomatic break. Shortly after the resumption of relations, the administration dispatched a team of experts to prepare for the restoration of existing aid programs and to assess possibilities for new projects. U.S. officials hoped that reopening the aid spigot would ease Panama’s political tensions and win the population, especially young Panamanians, away from radicalism. Besides programs to improve Panamanian agriculture and transportation networks, aid agencies attached importance to educational initiatives including scholarship programs and teacher-training projects designed, in the words of a U.S. embassy report, “to reach and influence Panamanian youth.”\(^{72}\)

But few had any illusions about the prospect of recasting U.S.-Panamanian relations through aid programs alone. Panama had, after all, remained a cauldron of anti-Americanism despite its status as one of the highest per-capita recipients of Alliance for Progress aid.\(^{73}\) A far more ambitious possibility – renegotiation of the treaties – gained appeal as a gesture that would curry favor with ordinary Panamanians and preserve conservative rule. The State Department remained the principle champion of the new approach, but others lent crucial support. Most importantly, Robert Anderson, Johnson’s ambassador to the on-again-off-again U.S.-Panamanian talks, grew increasingly convinced that the United States should comply with unceasing Panamanian demands for new treaties and led the drive for the new approach in the weeks leading up to Johnson’s momentous speech. Although there is no direct evidence of the president’s changing attitude in October and November, the readiness with which he accepted Anderson’s

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\(^{72}\) Panama City to State Department, 23 July 1964, box 2559, CSDF, NARA.

view in December suggests that he, too, was increasingly attuned to the logic of accommodation.\textsuperscript{74}

It was by no means a simple matter, however, for Johnson to embrace the new policy, even after the November landslide further eased his political inhibitions. Two final obstacles stood in the way. First, there remained a risk that political sentiment might shift back in threatening directions if the White House seemed to engage in a bald giveaway of U.S. privileges. Second, the bureaucracies that benefited most heavily from existing canal arrangements, above all the Defense Department and the military, remained deeply skeptical of change and promised to resist any diminishment of U.S. rights. Only after satisfying himself on these matters did Johnson commit the United States to the new course. The key to overcoming these final roadblocks lay in the administration’s shrewd manipulation of a peculiar futuristic fantasy that became a critical dimension of U.S. policy toward Panama in the second half of 1964 – the prospect that the United States would dig a sea-level canal somewhere in Central America before the end of the century. That possibility equipped Johnson with a rhetorical tool that he used skillfully to generate bureaucratic consensus and to provide himself with an additional dose of confidence that he could offer concessions without significant opposition.

Americans had discussed the possibility of a sea-level passageway for more than a quarter century. Until the 1930s, the lock canal had accommodated all types of ships. With the advent of massive tankers, ore transports, and aircraft carriers, however, the canal’s limitations started to show. Washington’s first response was to begin excavating a new set of locks that could accommodate the latest generation of ships. But construction was discontinued in 1942, by which time U.S. resources were required elsewhere. Amid global war, Washington also began to doubt the wisdom of relying on a complicated lock system that lay vulnerable to attack. The idea of solving these problems by digging a sea-level canal, most likely using atomic explosions, gained momentum in 1947. In that year, Congress approved a plan to study the possibility of converting the existing lock canal and, at the same time, to investigate alternative routes

\textsuperscript{74} Jorden’s book, presumably based on interviews with participants, asserts that Johnson was “delighted” with Anderson’s proposal during the December 2 White House meeting where Anderson formally proposed that the United States offer to renegotiate. Jorden, \textit{Panama Odyssey}, 100.
elsewhere in Central America. But the idea languished until 1960, when rapidly increasing canal traffic, along with old worries about the locks’ vulnerability, generated a flurry of new interest in the sea-level possibility. Over the following four years, the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Company, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the Army Corps of Engineers undertook more intensive feasibility studies.\(^75\)

New interest in the sea-level passageway also resulted from worries after 1958 that mounting political turmoil in Panama imperiled U.S. control over the existing canal. Anti-American riots in 1958 and 1959, U.S. fears of Castroite meddling in Central America following the 1959 Cuban revolution, and intensified Panamanian demands for renegotiation of the 1903 treaties persuaded the Kennedy administration that major changes in U.S. policy toward Panama were unavoidable. Construction of an alternative canal, until then seen as a solution to technical rather than political problems, gained appeal as a way to break free of the dilemma that increasingly confounded Washington: how to satisfy Panamanian nationalism while also preserving U.S. control. Digging a new canal promised to give the United States the freedom to relax its grip over the old canal while establishing a new, less controversial set of privileges in another location. It would be 1903 all over again, only this time Washington would be more careful about negotiating the terms.

If the canal’s appeal was obvious, the details – how and where to build it – were not. The Kennedy administration proved unable to resolve these questions and concluded in a 1962 National Security Action Memorandum that the United States had to await answers before it could move ahead with any reconfiguration of the U.S.-Panamanian relationship.\(^76\) It took the flag riots to push the issue back onto the U.S. agenda. The Johnson administration devoted little thought to the idea during the diplomatic crisis. The president lacked familiarity with the complicated matter, and in any case he probably calculated that he stood to lose politically if he emphasized it. To stress U.S. hopes of excavating an alternative canal might, after all, have risked implying that Washington lacked the toughness to defend its existing rights. Once the president had proved his mettle and ended the crisis, however, Washington turned its attention to the sea-level idea.

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\(^{75}\) “First Annual Report of the Atlantic-Pacific Interoceanic Canal Study Commission,” 31 July 1965, box 71, NSF, CF, LBJL.

\(^{76}\) National Security Action Memorandum 152, 30 April 1962, box 64, NSF, CF, LBJL.
as part of its wide-ranging consideration of long-term solutions to the Panama problem. The president successfully appealed to Congress for $17.5 million in new funds to accelerate engineering studies on five possible routes stretching between southern Nicaragua and northern Colombia.

The administration quickly encountered the same old uncertainties. Would any of the routes prove both financially and technically feasible? Could Washington negotiate terms to ensure control over a new canal? Would the nuclear explosions necessary to excavate the canal violate the Limited Test Ban Treaty? These questions had stymied the Kennedy administration, which refused to consider political matters before technical problems were solved. The Johnson administration chose a different approach. In contrast to his predecessor, Johnson valued the sea-level canal as much for the diplomatic and political purposes to which he could put it in the short term as for the theoretical benefits to U.S. trade and security over the long run. To be sure, the president supported further engineering surveys and appears to have sincerely believed that a new canal was realistic. But Johnson also viewed the prospect of a sea-level passageway as an important part of the solution to more immediate diplomatic, political, and bureaucratic problems. Increasingly, the administration exploited the sea-level canal idea as it sought to eliminate remaining pockets of real or potential resistance to the accommodationist policy that it preferred by fall 1964. In this effort, Johnson found advantage in the very uncertainties that had stymied the previous administration. With all the important decisions still to be made, Johnson discovered that the future canal could be a valuable rhetorical tool that could be shaped and reshaped to serve various purposes.

The administration first exploited the uncertainties surrounding the sea-level canal in mid-1964 as it sought to rein in Panamanian ambitions and to ensure that it would not be embarrassed by far-reaching demands. Shortly after the two countries resumed normal relations, Washington put the Panamanian government on notice by announcing that the United States and Colombia had reached an agreement on procedures for further cartographic studies of a possible canal running through northern Colombia. The Panamanian government could hardly miss the threat: If it drove too hard a bargain, the United States could simply choose to build a new canal in another country, thus negating the value of Panama’s chief national asset. While New York Times columnist Marguerite
Higgins called the ploy “a psychological stroke of genius,” Panamanians saw it as psychological warfare. Shortly after the U.S-Colombia understanding was announced, one Panama City radio station declared the agreement part of a U.S. “policy of blackmail, terror, and aggression” against Panama. Undeterred, U.S. negotiators resorted to the tactic again in July when the two sides opened talks. At the first session, U.S. officials rejected an ambitious Panamanian agenda demanding immediate discussion of a declaration of Panamanian sovereignty in the Canal Zone and the fixing of a date for termination of all U.S. rights there. The shocked U.S. delegation invited Army Secretary Stephen Ailes to brief the Panamanian delegation on U.S. planning for a sea-level canal that might be built outside Panama. The Panamanians relaxed their position.

In the fall, Johnson found that the sea-level canal could have as much political as diplomatic utility. Frequent assertions of the administration’s interest in the new seaway helped Johnson assuage his political opponents, who could hardly object to concessions on the old canal if a new and improved one, invulnerable to attack, was part of the same agenda. It is surely no coincidence that the administration publicly emphasized the sea-level canal at precisely those moments when it felt most vulnerable to criticism. In April, after Washington agreed to U.S.-Panamanian talks, the administration announced its agreement with Colombia to explore routes in that country. In July, as the Anderson-Illueca talks got underway, the administration publicly pressed for legislation to fund new feasibility studies. And in December, when Johnson announced U.S. willingness to renegotiate the canal treaties, the president strongly emphasized his new intention. In his speech, Johnson began by declaring his intention to “press forward” with “plans and preparations” for the new canal. Only after proclaiming that desire – an old idea about which, despite the fanfare, Johnson had little new to report – did Johnson announce the real news, U.S. willingness to renegotiate the 1903 treaties. In a background briefing for reporters on the same day, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy practiced the same strategy, obscuring U.S. concessions with strong emphasis on the new canal. Once

77 State Department report, “American Opinion Summary,” 29 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBRL; Panama embassy to State Department, 17 April 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBRL.
78 Newbegin to Mann, 8 July 1964, box 66, NSF, CF, LBRL.
the sea-level facility was operating, Bundy asserted, “the significance of the present lock operation would be reduced in effect to the negligible point.”

The administration’s manipulation of the sea-level canal worked well. Although news media were quick to point out that a new canal remained far in the future, they readily accepted the administration’s insistence that its decision to pursue the sea-level canal amounted to a major breakthrough and was the logical accompaniment of treaty-revision. Newspaper headlines emphasized the new canal in banner headlines on December 19. The Chicago Tribune, for example, proclaimed “U.S. Will Cut New Canal” across its front page, while a small, one-column sub-heading announced “Panama Offered New Treaty.” Editorials, meanwhile, emphasized the new canal in praising the administration’s announcement. The Washington Post, for instance, congratulated Johnson for taking “the sensible and equitable course” in pursuing the sea-level canal and renegotiating the old treaties in tandem. “The 1903 treaty is as politically archaic as the canal is technologically obsolete,” the Post asserted. Among prominent major publications, only the Wall Street Journal pointed to contradictions in Johnson’s policy, noting that a U.S. decision to build a new canal outside Panama might damage U.S.-Panamanian relations and make any new provisions for joint operation of the old canal difficult to sustain.

The sea-level canal was perhaps most important to the administration as a means of generating consensus within the national-security bureaucracy. From as far back as the 1958 riots, the Panama issue had produced divisions between the State Department, on the one side, and the Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the other. State Department officials naturally viewed the canal dispute principally as a problem of diplomacy and negotiation. Although they recognized the value of U.S. control, they consistently urged deference to Panamanian demands on small points of disagreement to preserve the most important U.S. rights and head off a devastating confrontation. The Defense Department and the military, by contrast, feared change of any kind in Panama. To these bureaucracies, the U.S. presence in Panama was critical not only to protecting...

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80 Transcript of background briefing by Bundy, 18 Dec. 1964, box 70, NSF, CF, LBJL.
and operating the canal but also to managing an elaborate regional defense establishment headquartered in the Canal Zone. At its Panamanian hub, the U.S. military maintained forces and supplies considered essential to countersubversion in the hemisphere, operated a research-and-development center for jungle warfare, managed elaborate communications and intelligence networks, and ran the School of the Americas to train military personnel from throughout Latin America. Any bid to scale back U.S. privileges threatened all of these activities.

In order to go ahead with meaningful concessions to Panama, the administration had to overcome the military’s reservations. The problem became especially acute only four days before Johnson’s landmark speech, when Army Secretary Ailes refused to go along with drafts being prepared in the White House. The Army particularly opposed proposals to cede unused Canal Zone land back to Panama and to limit the military’s rights to operate commissaries. All Ailes would accept, reported one NSC aide, was “rearrangement” of provisions with the existing treaties “with minimal changes.”84 The Defense Department, it seemed, wanted “to offer as little as possible to keep control of the negotiations in its hands.” Johnson responded to this resistance in two ways. First, he dispatched a CIA agent to Chicago to track down Dwight Eisenhower to obtain the former president’s approval for the concessions that Johnson planned to offer. To the administration’s relief, Eisenhower, the avuncular former president with unimpeachable military credentials, agreed that Johnson could state publicly that he had approved of the plan – a gesture of support that the president invoked in the first minute of his speech.85 While Johnson calculated that Eisenhower’s backing would help ease any lingering problems with congressional and public opinion, his timing suggests that he was at least as concerned about reassuring the military.

Second, Johnson exploited the sea-level canal idea, whose vagueness once again proved useful. On December 16, the Joint Chiefs of Staff accepted White House proposals related to the existing canal in return for modifications in language covering the sea-level project. The chiefs demanded especially that the United States avoid any

84 Robert M. Sayre to Bundy, 14 Dec. 1964, NSF, CF, LBJL.
quick commitments about the administration or operation of the new canal. The State Department had proposed a declaration that the new facility would come under either the multilateral control of an international commission or the bilateral control of the United States and the government of the country where it was built. The Joint Chiefs, wary of any plan to share authority, insisted that it was “premature” for the president to take any position on the matter and demanded that Johnson avoid committing the United States to any particular “method of control.” The White House could hardly object to such a modest request and removed all comment on the issue from the president’s speech. With the last obstruction overcome, Johnson could go forward with his landmark speech without fear of bureaucratic dissent. Once again, the vagaries surrounding the new canal proved useful to Johnson, in this case as the lynchpin of bureaucratic consensus. The fictitiousness of the sea-level canal enabled all sides to make of it what they wished.

Conclusion

The administration had good reason for satisfaction as 1964 came to an end. While the president’s policy garnered praise from all but the fringes of the political spectrum, U.S. diplomats in Panama City reported that the new approach was yielding precisely the intended effect. Ambassador Vaughn happily noted that Foreign Minister Eleta’s first response to the news was to exclaim, “this will send the communists al carajo [to hell].” Within a few days, events seemed to bear out that prediction. The “commies,” Vaughn reported on New Year’s Eve, had been “thrown badly off balance” by Johnson’s speech, which the ambassador credited with creating “a sense of confusion among extremists here.” U.S. willingness to renegotiate had “pulled the rug from under the Panamanian left,” embassy officials asserted in another report to Washington.

86 Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, 16 Dec. 1964, box 67, NSF, CF, LBJL, and Sayre to Bundy, 17 Dec. 1964, box 67, NSF, CF, LBJL.
87 The loudest fringe critic was Congressman Flood, who traced his lineage to Theodore Roosevelt and had long protested any U.S. compromise on the canal. Flood complained that Johnson’s announcement marked the victory of the “Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the international communist conspiracy.” See LaFeber, The Panama Canal, 146. Although this author could find no opinion poll data related specifically to Panama, more general polls gave the administration good reason for confidence in early 1965. In polls over the first six months of 1965, between 50 and 60 percent of Americans expressed approval of the administration’s handling of foreign affairs, while only 15-22 percent expressed disapproval. Gallup Political Index, Report No. 2, July 1965 (American Institute of Public Opinion, 1965).
88 Vaughn to State Department, 18 Dec. 1964, box 67, NSF, CF, LBJL.
89 Vaughn to State Department, 31 Dec. 1964, box 2560, NSDF, NARA.
Agitators intent on marking the anniversary of the 1964 riots with a new confrontation now had little hope of stirring anything up, reported the embassy, adding that Johnson’s speech had helped channel Panamanian nationalism toward a “reasonable policy” that properly expressed the “true hope of the Panamanian people.”

Johnson failed, however, to realize his vision of a reconfigured relationship with a reliable, newly stabilized Panama. U.S.-Panamanian talks, which resumed in January 1965 with a new agenda and high hopes for quick success, dragged on for the next two and a half years as the two governments struggled to find an agreeable formula without agitating their political opponents at home. Finally, on June 26, 1967, they unveiled a 41-article accord that provided for joint administration of the canal, abolished the Canal Zone, and set an end date for all U.S. privileges in Panama in 2009 at the latest. Another treaty provided for joint defense of the canal, and a third gave Washington exclusive rights to build a sea-level canal in Panama provided it moved ahead within twenty years. But the deals quickly unraveled amid political turbulence in Panama. Ultranationalists and leftists excoriated Robles for demanding too little in the negotiations. Wary of inflaming the situation, Robles refused to submit the treaties to the Panamanian assembly for ratification. His caution did neither him nor the agreements any good. Exploiting chronic economic woes and resurgent nationalist resentments, maverick populist Arnulfo Arias won Panama’s 1968 presidential election. Arias showed little enthusiasm for his predecessor’s handiwork. With the treaties obviously dead in Panama, Johnson saw no reason to send them to Congress, and his experiment in concession sputtered to a disappointing end. Only dramatic changes in U.S. and Panamanian politics would revive the treaties a decade later.

The proximate cause of the treaties’ failure during the 1960s lay in Panama. But Johnson’s policy contributed to that outcome in its own way by propping up a political order that served U.S. interests but did little to address the socioeconomic problems at the heart of Panama’s political turbulence. The administration’s exceptional performance with respect to Panama must not, after all, be mistaken for genuine openness to change in

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90 Panama City to State Department, “Review of Political Developments, December 19-24,” 24 Dec. 1964, box 2558, CSDF, NARA.
91 For discussion of the 1965-1967 talks and the treaties, see Jorden, Panama Odyssey, 107-119.
92 For coverage of the 1970s, see Conniff, Panama and the United States, chapter 7.
either Panamanian society or the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. On the contrary, Johnson’s policy represented a shift in means rather than ends. The president, unwilling to run risks of any sort, embraced a policy of concession only after assuring himself that neither Congress nor the national-security bureaucracy could criticize him effectively from the right. Equally important, the administration chose the exceptional course in Panama because of a growing certainty in 1964 that concessions would strengthen Panama’s oligarchy – a regime that had become synonymous with cronyism, corruption, economic injustice, and, most importantly, partnership with the United States. Washington’s willingness to reconfigure its relationship with Panama reflected acceptance that the Panamanian political landscape had changed in ways that the United States could no longer ignore. Beginning in the late 1950s, widespread social discontent placed the oligarchy on the defensive. To avoid being swept away, it either had to co-opt its critics by embracing some of their demands or resort to repressive force. Chiari and Robles embraced the first option, and in 1964 the Johnson administration concluded that its interest lay in helping them succeed.

U.S. policy toward Panama reflected the same objectives that dictated the more general U.S. approach to Third World unrest during the Johnson years. While the administration opted for an uncompromising, even militaristic policy to maintain the status quo in most areas, in Panama it settled on a policy of concession. The difference stemmed not from any fundamental divergence of purpose, but from an exceptional set of circumstances that prevailed in connection with Panama – conditions generally absent as the administration crafted policy toward other areas that presented nationalist challenges to U.S. security. Most importantly, Johnson concluded in early 1964 that by staring down Chiari he had satisfied perceived geostrategic, political, and personal imperatives for toughness. Having established his credentials as an uncompromising leader, Johnson could consider concession without overwhelming fear that he would be accused of softness, a possibility that deterred him from compromise in other areas including Vietnam. Johnson’s judgment that he could embrace such an approach without provoking serious opposition from the military – largely the result of Johnson’s ability to manipulate the sea-level canal idea, the single greatest oddity of the Panama situation – also contrasted with the administration’s more general experience. In most U.S. foreign-
policy decisions related to Third World areas, the military pushed the administration toward hardline solutions. Finally, Johnson’s confidence that accommodation would bolster, rather than undercut, U.S. interests stands apart from the administration’s overall record. Robles’ reliable anticommunism, the Guardia Nacional’s resurgence, and the continued presence of massive U.S. force in the Canal Zone gave the administration confidence that it could offer concessions while containing demands for significant sociopolitical change. In no other area of the Third World did Washington enjoy such comfort.
Introduction

The war on drugs is a multibillion dollar industry. It has vastly extended the reach of the criminal justice system in America, spawning bureaucracies that owe their existence to the drug war and thus have a stake in perpetuating it. Law enforcement at every level—federal, state, and local—has come to depend on drug profits, through asset forfeiture and seizure laws, whereby police confiscate the money and property of convicted drug dealers. The drug war is also central to the broader culture wars that arose in the 1960s and re-emerged in the 1980s over divisive social and moral issues. In many respects, the war on drugs was a response to the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s—racial tensions, increasingly radical student movements and massive anti-war demonstrations that led some conservatives to question the loyalties of the counter-culture—and thus drug use has become inextricably linked in the public imagination with politically subversive activities. In subsequent decades, an array of powerful interests has fueled the drug war: politicians of all stripes eager to score points with their constituents, presidents in need of a scapegoat issue, parents appalled with the unruly behavior of their teenage offspring, and a news media that thrives on sensationalism.\(^1\) Although hugely unpopular among many in the academic and medical communities, the punitive approach to the drug war—which treats drug users as criminals rather than addicts in need of assistance—has enjoyed the overwhelming support of a majority of Americans.

Much of the literature on the drug war rightly treats it as a public policy issue, laments the failure of U.S. anti-narcotics policies, and argues for a saner approach to

\(^1\) Dan Baum makes this argument in his fascinating study of the drug war, *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996).
issues of drug abuse and trafficking. This literature is so prevalent that it has pervaded the public discourse on drug issues to the extent that it is now somewhat of a truism to declare that the drug war has totally failed to stem the tide of drug trafficking or even to reduce the global population of drug abusers. But the war on drugs was not merely a domestic public policy issue; it was an international endeavor that had profound ramifications for U.S. foreign policy, American public opinion, and the countries targeted for intensified anti-narcotics efforts. Scholars who have studied the international dimensions of the U.S.-led war on drugs, while providing keen insights into the nature and extent of U.S. drug diplomacy, and the (often regrettable) impacts of U.S. narcotics policies on source countries, nevertheless tend to view it in isolation from the broader agendas of American foreign policy. These scholars also generally avoid linking American public opinion with the pursuit of U.S. anti-narcotics policies abroad.

It is important to remember, however, that the elimination of drug trafficking as a

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primary goal of U.S. foreign policy, especially during the Reagan administration, was pursued in concert with other foreign policy goals, and often had adverse effects on the ability to achieve those goals. Reagan’s number one foreign policy goal in Latin America, to roll back the tide of Soviet-inspired leftism, conflicted with the pursuit of anti-narcotics policies. Although Reagan revived the drug war early in his presidency, his devotion to the contras created a lawless atmosphere within certain circles of his administration, leading to an institutional tolerance of narcotics trafficking on the part of both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Justice. And although Reagan administration officials and self-styled leaders in Congress systematically laid the groundwork for the militarization of the drug war, both domestically and in the Andes region of South America, these plans were met with resistance by a Defense Department concerned primarily with military preparedness.

It was not until George H.W. Bush, himself a veteran of the drug war as head of both the National Narcotics Border Interdiction Service and the South Florida Task Force, as well as a leading proponent of militarization, came into office, bringing with him as Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, that the Department of Defense enthusiastically enlisted in the war on drugs. The militarization of the drug war was pursued in part to alleviate public and Congressional pressures to draw down existing military stocks and decrease defense spending. Public concerns about drug trafficking and drug abuse had skyrocketed throughout the 1980s, largely as a reaction to the influx of cocaine from the Andean countries, the subsequent crack epidemic, and the highly-publicized deaths of public figures, like basketball star Len Bias, from drug overdoses.

Although Congress had been clamoring for military involvement in anti-narcotics
efforts throughout the 1980s, the Pentagon had adamantly refused to participate for fear of jeopardizing military preparedness in the conflict with the Soviets and Soviet-inspired movements in the Third World. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the role of the American military in the drug war was re-examined. U.S. public opinion, which refused to sanction the support of the contras in their battle against the Soviet-influenced Sandinista government of Nicaragua, favored the militarization of the drug war. Ironically, however, in practice the militarization of the drug war entailed a protracted effort to crush leftist guerrilla movements; money and war materiel were funneled to Andean governments struggling to extinguish the threat to their authority posed by leftist guerrillas linked to the production and trafficking of cocaine. Absent the menace of Soviet Third World expansionism, the drug war provided the raison d’etre for a heightened U.S. military presence in the Andes.

Reagan Revives the Drug War

For Reagan, the war on drugs was a natural outgrowth of the law and order brand of conservatism he had helped pioneer as Governor of California. It was during Reagan’s gubernatorial years that President Richard Nixon first declared war on drugs, promoting a theory of crime in which individual pathology, and a personal lack of conscience were blamed for increased drug use and criminal activity. Although the war on drugs as a priority of the federal government failed to outlive Nixon’s presidency, Reagan’s revival of the drug war was integral to the broader culture wars of the 1980s, during which the New Right renounced what many viewed as dangerous social developments rooted in the 1960s—gay pride and sexual liberation, the expulsion of religion from public life, and of
course, a treacherously lax attitude toward drug use, nowhere more apparent than in the Carter administration’s casual approach to the use of marijuana and even cocaine.

During the Carter years, decriminalization was at the center of the debate over marijuana. Carter himself weighed in on the issue, declaring in a speech before Congress his support for the elimination of federal penalties for the possession of up to an ounce of marijuana.\(^4\) Peter Bourne, Carter’s drug czar, adopted a “harm reduction” approach, which acknowledged the impossibility of eliminating drug abuse and instead sought to mitigate the harm it caused. Carter’s midterm drug strategy epitomized this approach, conceding that “drugs cannot be forced out of existence; they will be with us as long as people find in them the relief or satisfaction they desire,” but suggesting that “the harm caused by drug abuse can be reduced. We cannot talk in absolutes—that drug abuse will cease, that no more illegal drugs will cross our borders—because if we are honest with ourselves, we know that is beyond our power.”\(^5\)

As the decade came to a close, and teen marijuana use spiked, the decriminalization debate was blamed for sending the wrong message about the danger of drugs to the nation’s youth. By 1980, the number of teenagers reporting marijuana usage within the previous year had skyrocketed over fifteen percentage points.\(^6\) Whether these numbers reflected an actual increase in cannabis consumption among teenagers, or merely an increase in the number of teenagers comfortable with admitting to smoking

\(^4\) Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, pp. 94-95.
\(^5\) Quoted in Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, p. 96.
pot, they set off alarm bells within both the nascent parents movement and the incoming Reagan administration.

Reagan’s own attitude toward drug use and the negligence of the Carter administration was apparent even before he took office. In a series of radio programs, he encouraged intolerance toward marijuana use, arguing “that it was definitely harmful to health and probably represented a dangerous threat to an entire generation.”7 Reagan blasted the Carter administration for its ignorance to the dangers of smoking pot: “Mr. Bourne and others who press for decriminalization and even legalization are signaling to young people that marijuana is harmless or in the parlance of the day, ‘real cool.’”8

Upon ascending to the presidency, Reagan launched a media blitz to re-educate the public to the dangers of marijuana. In June 1982, the President convened a meeting with representatives of eighteen federal agencies tasked with drug control policy to assert a new and more intolerant vision of drug use: “we must mobilize all our forces to stop the flow of drugs into this country, to let kids know the truth, to erase the false glamour that surrounds drugs, and to brand drugs such as marijuana exactly for what they are—dangerous, and particularly to school-age youth.”9 Four months later, in a radio address to the nation, Reagan declared, “the mood toward drugs is changing in this country, and the momentum is with us…Drugs are bad, and we’re going after them. As I’ve said

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8 Ibid.
before, we’ve taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we’re going to win the war on drugs.”

This is not to say that Reagan was single-handedly responsible for reviving the drug war. In fact, Reagan presided over a shift in public opinion that was in large part a backlash against Carter’s perceived nonchalance about the potential dangers of drug abuse. Whereas in May 1977, the New York Times had triumphantly declared that, “Marijuana Smoking Gains Acceptance; Users’ Freakish Image Fades,” three years later, headlines were lamenting the “Rise in Drug Addicts.” The reputation of the Carter administration had also been tarnished by widespread reports of staff drug use; Peter Bourne, Carter’s drug czar, resigned in disgrace after admitting to falsifying a prescription for methaqualone, and rumors that several members of his staff were regular users of marijuana ran rampant. And the parents’ movement to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, with the Parents Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE) in the lead, gained steady ground during the late 1970s. The impetus for a tougher stance on drug laws also came from a Congress growing increasingly aware of the political significance of the drug issue. As early as 1980, members of the House of Representatives were calling for military involvement in enforcing drug laws. These calls fell on the deaf ears of the Carter administration, which did not prioritize the battle against drug smuggling to the same degree as its successor.

14 See Baum, Smoke and Mirrors, chapter 8, “PRIDE Before the Fall,” pp. 116-136.
The Supply-Side Approach

Although Reagan inherited the war on drugs from Richard Nixon, he pursued a different strategy for achieving drug policy goals. Although in practice the distinctions between supply-side and demand-side anti-narcotics policies are often fuzzy, demand reduction generally involves education and prevention efforts while supply reduction entails an international approach that has focused on pressuring foreign narcotics-producing nations to curb both drug production and trafficking by adopting whatever measures U.S. officials have determined to be most effective or efficient. The Nixon approach to drug abuse was characterized by a focus on treatment and prevention, the budget for which was nearly double that of supply reduction efforts, including both law enforcement and international objectives. The Reagan administration, however, immediately shifted emphasis toward supply-side measures, so that by as early as 1983, $703 million was allocated for law enforcement and international narcotics control, while treatment and prevention programs received only $191 million.

The Reagan administration’s primary international drug control policy objective was source country eradication of narcotic crops, the logic of which, ironically, conflicted with Reagan’s own free-market mantra. By devoting a disproportionate amount of resources to eliminating the supply of drugs without concentrating in equal measure on reducing the demand for them, the Reagan administration ignored the most fundamental economic precept and designed a virtually success-proof anti-narcotics strategy.


17 Ibid.
Trafficking identified as “the top priority...crop control at the source through destruction of illicit crops in the fields.”\textsuperscript{18} Congress echoed the administration’s assumptions regarding the centrality of crop eradication to the success of international narcotics control, arguing that “the most effective and economical means of reducing the supply of...illegal drugs is to control the production of such substances at the source.”\textsuperscript{19} The emphasis on supply-side crop eradication, therefore, was the product of a bi-partisan consensus embraced by both the executive and legislative branches of government, no doubt in part because it removed the onus of responsibility from drug users themselves—particularly ironic given that a philosophy of individual responsibility was a crucial premise of the drug war.

What U.S. government officials failed to grasp, however, was that the social, cultural, and political obstacles to narcotic crop eradication in source countries were insurmountable. Crop eradication was neither effective nor cost-efficient, and despite intelligence assessments that repeatedly underscored the fundamental impossibility of curbing the flow of drugs, administration officials and congressional leaders insisted on crop eradication with a perseverance usually reserved for the insane. Furthermore, overcoming the impediments to successful crop eradication required a level of pressure on foreign governments that too often served as a focal point for indigenous protest against the threatened destruction of traditional ways of life and more broadly, U.S. encroachment on national sovereignty.

The narcotics intelligence community consistently reported on the likely challenges of a supply-side strategy. As early as 1981, the Drug Enforcement Administration recognized that successful eradication would likely result in geographic shifts in production, acknowledging that “…there is strong evidence that domestic production will expand to fill shortages arising from successful eradication abroad.”\(^{20}\) The DEA also expressed concern that, “growers will shift to cultivating smaller plots, possibly more widely dispersed and in more rugged terrain,” in response to the destruction of illicit crops.\(^{21}\) In the same report, DEA confessed to the ease with which cultivation sites could be shifted to “any of the Caribbean and Central American countries…The geographic conditions are optimum, the economic incentives are present, and many of the central governments are either too weak, too preoccupied, or too uninterested to address the problem.”\(^{22}\)

One of the most serious problems with crop eradication was its failure to accommodate deep-rooted cultural traditions. In Bolivia and Peru, coca has been grown for thousands of years, and in Peru alone, an estimated two million Peruvians are chewers of coca.\(^{23}\) The Senate Select Committee on Drug Abuse and Control, which took the lead in devising international narcotics control legislation, was aware of the fact that Peru was a traditional producer of licit coca and that approximately fourteen thousand metric tons of coca was needed for the native population and for legitimate export purposes.\(^{24}\)


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 4.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 7.


Nevertheless, the committee insisted—with a healthy dose of cultural chauvinism—that, “the practice of coca leaf chewing has to be phased out, not only for the health and welfare of the pitiful users of coca, but also to reduce coca leaf production to lessen the risk of its diversion to the illicit traffic of coca ostensibly produced for chewing.” The committee expressed its patent disapproval of Andean cultural norms, arguing that “the chewing of coca leaf is a primitive, antiquated, debilitating practice…It is time this practice be addressed, particularly in Peru and Bolivia.”

The emphasis on international supply-side narcotics control policies led naturally to an appeal for U.S. military involvement. In a Congressional debate over the proper role of the military in drug interdiction, Representative Larry Hopkins of Kentucky argued that, “the magnitude of the drug problem and the corrosive impact that it has on American families represent a clear and present danger to our national security, and should be as central a concern to the Department of Defense as any other visible threat.” Representative Claude Pepper of Florida insisted that, “the time has come to bring the full force and resources of the military into the war on drugs….the need is there, the need is urgent, we can and we must develop a plan to allow the military to interdict drugs.”

Sheriff Nick Navarro of Broward County, Florida, also expressed the urgency for U.S. military intervention: “There is a role for the military in this war. If we are at war, damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead...hell, we have got to go forward.” And Representative Jon Kyl of Arizona observed that, “there is a unanimity of opinion here that is very

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26 Ibid., p. 21.
28 Ibid., p. 74.
29 Ibid., p. 115.
Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci shrugged off these requests, arguing that, “The primary role of the Department of Defense is to protect and defend this country from armed aggression. Nothing must stand in the way of our readiness or our preparedness to perform this task.”

**The Narco-Guerrilla Connection**

U.S. crop eradication efforts reverberated through the Andes in unexpected ways, constituting a clear example of what one historian has labeled “blowback,” in a reference to the unintended consequences of U.S. interventions abroad. The substantial political clout of peasant coca growers syndicates—many of which had allied with other workers’ groups and engaged in large-scale demonstrations against government coca control and law enforcement activities—had always militated against the success of crop eradication. But the presence of U.S. Drug Enforcement Agents in the Andean countries intensified violent nationalism and encouraged the partnership between leftist guerrillas, drug traffickers, and coca cultivators. In 1983, the launch of crop eradication efforts in the Upper Huallaga Valley led the Sendero Luminoso (“Shining Path” a.k.a. Communist Party of Peru) guerrilla fighters to take advantage of peasant resistance to government policy to infiltrate the valley and link up with the coca growers. Recruiters for Sendero Luminoso described crop eradication as a clear example of the corrupt Peruvian regime’s collaboration with imperialistic U.S. policies designed to destroy the

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30 Ibid., p. 35.
31 Ibid., p. 279.
livelihood of Indian peasants. These cash-strapped leftists sacrificed their revolutionary ideology first to offer protection to coca growers against eradication teams, and later, to insinuate themselves into both coca production and distribution, fomenting an alliance with native peasants that undermined the Peruvian government’s control over the Upper Huallaga and provided the basis for the increasing attention of U.S. policymakers to what became known as “narco-terrorism.” As early as 1984, the National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee had identified “the violent resistance of coca growers” as a major obstacle to successful crop eradication in Peru. The failure of the Peruvian government to expand its enforcement reach into the traditional coca growing areas of the country meant that, “coca eradication was not effective and coca cultivation continued to expand.”

National Security Decision Directive 221, issued in April 1986, at the behest of Vice President George H.W. Bush, declared drugs a national security threat, thereby authorizing the administration to skirt congressional notification requirements for implementing narcotics policies abroad, and widening the scope of military involvement in the drug war. The directive was aimed specifically at “those nations with a flourishing narcotics industry, where a combination of international criminal trafficking organizations, rural insurgents, and urban terrorists can undermine the stability of the local government; corrupt efforts to curb drug crop production, processing, and distribution; and distort public perception of the narcotics issue in such a way that it

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38 Ibid.
becomes part of an anti-U.S. or anti-Western debate.”

NSDD-221 explicitly addressed the threat posed by insurgent movements in drug-producing countries, suggesting that the anti-government activities of these groups could be halted through an attack on their major source of funding—profits from drug trafficking. Thus, the directive linked the goals of counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency in official administration policy for the first time.

In a press conference on the directive, Vice President Bush—chairman of the administration’s task force on combating terrorism—described the links between terrorism and drug trafficking, relating the November 1985 takeover of the Colombian Palace of Justice by M19 guerrillas. More than one hundred people were killed, Colombian Supreme Court justices among them, and some of the documents seized were U.S. extradition requests. Bush lamented the incident but warned that, “the demonstrable role drug trafficking played in the massacre is anything but an isolated event.” NSDD-221 thus sought “to reduce the ability of terrorists to derive support from drug trafficking.”

Driving home the connection between domestic drug abuse and terrorism, Bush admonished, “when you buy drugs, you could also very well be subsidizing terrorist activities overseas.”

The relationship between drug producers and traffickers and guerrillas was more complicated than the Reagan administration acknowledged. Administration officials tended to ignore evidence of right-wing guerrilla drug trafficking while leveling charges

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41 Ibid.
against left-wing regimes perceived as hostile to U.S. interests. The coinage of the term “narco-guerrilla” and its repeated usage had the effect of over-simplifying the complexity of a relationship characterized by divergent ends. One prominent scholar of the political economy of cocaine in the Andes has elaborated on the subject: “The illegal psychoactive drug (PSAD) industry and the guerrillas have been odd bedfellows. At times the government has been their common enemy, but they have fundamentally opposite goals. The illegal PSAD industry represents a crude, unrestrained form of capitalism, while the guerrilla organizations have their origins in their fight against the unfair, crude capitalism that has prevailed in the country [Colombia].”

An April 1988 cable to the National Security Council from the American embassy in Bogota recognized the impossibility of clearly distinguishing counter-narcotics from counter-insurgency, arguing that the term “narco-guerrilla” reflected the intricacies of the Colombian reality. American ambassador to Colombia Charles Gillespie acknowledged the complexity of the relationship between drug traffickers and leftist insurgents, conceding that “their objectives differ and they even frequently kill each other.” Despite this divergence of interests, however, both elements threatened the security and legitimacy of the Colombian government, and therefore any material or military assistance provided by the U.S. would be used not only to cripple the cocaine cartels, but also to immobilize the insurgents.

An earlier cable from the U.S. embassy in Bogota described the evolving power relations among various guerrilla groups, noting the “eclipse of M-19 as Colombia’s

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43 Cable from the American embassy in Bogota to the National Security Council, Subject: Equipment for Colombian Anti-Narcotics/Anti-Insurgency Activities, April 1988. McNamara, Thomas E.: Files, Box 92270, Colombia (2), NSC Staff Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
premier active guerrilla group,” and identifying the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) as the number one threat facing the Colombian government. Colombian military leaders reportedly hoped to “attack the FARC by conducting operations against Colombia’s narcotics traffickers,” because “hitting a mixed FARC-narc camp would not be as politically sensitive as hitting ‘pure’ guerrilla targets.”\textsuperscript{44} Apparently, calculations about the potential political repercussions of counter-insurgency measures led the Colombian military leadership to emphasize the counter-narcotics aspects of those measures.

The U.S. embassy in Lima warned that the Sendero presence in the Upper Huallaga was likely to lead the Peruvian government and military to focus on combating the insurgents and not on eliminating coca production. A March 1988 cable explained that the Peruvian military leadership had “shifted its principal concern to dealing with the growing insurgency,” and argued that U.S. policy should focus primarily on “providing low cost, low profile cooperation on U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine.”\textsuperscript{45} The embassy also reported on the nature of Sendero membership, acknowledging that, “peasants support it out of fear or in response to excesses of the security forces.”\textsuperscript{46} Hence, counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategies emphasizing U.S. assistance to the Peruvian military and security forces were often counter-productive.

\textsuperscript{44} Cable from the American embassy in Bogota to DEA, CIA, DIA, USCINCSO, American embassies in Quito, Caracas, Panama, Lima, and Secretary of State, Subject: Guerrillas: Looking Towards a Bigger War, March 1987. McNamara, Thomas E.: Files, Box 92270, Colombia (3), NSC Staff, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{45} Cable from the American embassy in Lima to NSC, DIA, Secretaries of State and Defense, and USCINCSO, Subject: Program for Enhanced Military to Military Relations with Peru, March 1988. McNamara, Thomas E.: Files, Box 92200, Colombia (2), NSC Staff Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
A related National Security Decision Directive, NSDD-277, issued in June 1987, described low-intensity warfare as a military option for achieving foreign policy objectives short of full-scale conventional warfare. Low-intensity conflict was described as involving “protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies.” The strategy combined economic aid with counter-insurgency support for countries battling leftist guerrilla movements (as in Peru and Colombia), and provided funding for counter-insurgents seeking to topple Soviet-supported governments (as in Nicaragua). In practice, the low-intensity conflict doctrine inspired tactics that fostered U.S. government complicity in the drug smuggling and terrorist activities of those insurgent groups it supported (i.e. the contras). Meanwhile, administration officials continued to publicize the war on drugs and terror as waged against those groups perceived as hostile to U.S. interests (i.e. Shining Path).

The Contras

Despite pursuing increasingly heavy-handed tactics in the international war on drugs, the success of narcotics control as a major foreign policy objective in Andean drug-producing countries suffered from the unintended consequences of Reagan’s personal pet project in the region—the overthrow of Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. The specter of Vietnam shadowed both ventures, threatening executive control over foreign policy and leading to an emphasis on low intensity conflict and so-called “paramilitary” actions. U.S. public opinion, fearful of becoming bogged down in another guerrilla-warfare quagmire—this time in the jungles of Central America—

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consistently opposed the provision of U.S. aid, military or otherwise, to the contras.\textsuperscript{48}

The limitations on Reagan’s freedom to conduct foreign policy, imposed by both public opinion and Congressional restrictions on funding, encouraged his administration to pursue immoral and potentially illegal means of providing support to the contras.

In Reagan’s mind, the battle was between a communist government hell-bent on exporting revolution throughout the whole of Latin America and a group of dedicated “freedom fighters” that he likened to the founding fathers. The stakes were high—if the Sandinistas were to emerge from the struggle victorious, having crushed internal opposition to the regime, Reagan warned, “it would place in jeopardy the survival of each of those small and fragile democracies now in Central America, open up the possibility of Soviet military bases on America’s doorstep, could threaten the security of the Panama Canal, [and] inaugurate a vast migration northward to the United States of hundreds of thousands of refugees.”\textsuperscript{49}

When Congress’s passage of the Boland amendments effectively prohibited the appropriation of military and even humanitarian aid to the contras, administration officials, along with the President himself, aggressively sought out alternate sources of funding. Profits from the illicit sale of narcotics constituted one such source. In December, 1985, public allegations surfaced that two of the largest and best-equipped contra splinter groups—the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) and the Revolutionary

\textsuperscript{48} In a Harris Poll dated July 13, 1987, 74 percent of those polled said they were opposed to “the US once again sending $100 million in military and other aid to the contras in Nicaragua.” Institute for Social Research, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Democratic Alliance (ARDE)—were actively engaged in drug smuggling.\textsuperscript{50} It was also reported that Sebastian Gonzalez Mendiola, a leader of the splinter group known as M-3 had been indicted on cocaine trafficking charges in Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{51} U.S. officials in charge of monitoring narcotics shipments from Colombia claimed they began to receive reports of contra involvement in drug trafficking in 1984, right around the time Congress voted to block funding for the contras’ military efforts.\textsuperscript{52} A U.S. government source familiar with a contemporary National Intelligence Estimate prepared by the CIA alleged that one of ARDE’s top commanders had used drug profits to purchase $250,000 worth of arms and a helicopter.\textsuperscript{53}

Democratic Senator from Massachusetts John Kerry chaired a Senate subcommittee that launched a series of hearings to investigate the allegations, eventually producing a report entitled, “Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy.” In one of its primary findings, the report concluded that, “U.S. officials involved in Central America failed to address the drug issue for fear of jeopardizing the war efforts against Nicaragua.”\textsuperscript{54} More specifically, the committee found, “it is clear that individuals who provided support for the Contras were involved in drug trafficking, the supply network of the Contras was used by drug trafficking organizations, and elements of the Contras themselves knowingly received financial aid and material assistance from drug

\textsuperscript{54} “Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy,” A Report Prepared by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, December 1988, p. 2.
trafficickers. In each case, one or another agency of the U.S. government had information regarding the involvement either while it was occurring, or immediately thereafter.”

The Kerry committee thus not only charged the contras themselves with profiting from drug trafficking, but indicted the Reagan administration for its complicity in illegal, immoral, and counter-productive activities.

The CIA’s investigatory report on its own role in the contra/cocaine scandal concluded that, “CIA acted inconsistently in handling allegations or information indicating that Contra-related organizations and individuals were involved in drug trafficking. In some cases, CIA knowledge of allegations or information indicating that organizations or individuals had been involved in drug trafficking did not deter their use by CIA. In other cases, CIA did not act to verify drug trafficking allegations or information even when it had the opportunity to do so.”

In addition to the inconsistent behavior of CIA officials who turned a blind eye to contra drug smuggling, National Security Council member Oliver North, who more than any other single person was intimately involved in both contra fundraising activities and the Iranian arms sales, was aware that prominent contra leaders were trafficking narcotics to fund their military campaigns against the Sandinistas. In a diary entry dated August 9, 1995, North cited a discussion about contra re-supply operations led by Mario Calero, brother of Adolfo Calero, leader of the FDN. North confessed that, “Honduran DC-6 which is being used for runs out of New Orleans is probably being used for drug runs into

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55 Ibid., p. 36.
In another entry dated July 12, 1985, North recorded his telephone conversation with Richard Secord concerning a planned purchase of arms from a Honduran warehouse. Secord informed North that, “14M to finance [the arms in the warehouse] came from drugs.” During the course of the Kerry committee’s investigation, North’s own notebooks provided evidence extensively documenting his knowledge of contra involvement in drug trafficking and the use of drug profits to fund contra military operations.

The Reagan administration ignored allegations of contra involvement in drug trafficking, while insisting, on the basis of questionable evidence, that the Sandinista government was actively involved in drug smuggling. In a televised address to the American people in March 1986, Reagan sounded the alarm: “I know every American parent concerned about the drug problem will be outraged to learn that top Nicaraguan Government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking….No, there seems to be no crime to which the Sandinistas will not stoop; this is an outlaw regime.”

By 1987, the CIA was publicly backing away from charges of Sandinista and Cuban drug trafficking. One article noted that, “accusations of involvement in international drug traffic have been a standard feature of the ideological battles over the administration’s Central American policy.” The article, which referred to official allegations of left-wing drug running as a “propaganda effort,” also described the dubious

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58 Ibid.
59 See ibid., Kerry Report—Iran/Contra North Notebook Citation Bibliography.
nature of information provided by informants: “They can usually tell what the Drug
Enforcement Administration or their other U.S. intelligence paymasters would like to
hear, so they dish it up with enthusiasm—but take care that their colorful inventions are
impossible to verify or discredit. When an informant’s fable fits an administration policy
line, it is promptly transformed into leaks, official statements and headlines.”62

Reagan’s plea to hold the contra forces together “body and soul” created a
political atmosphere in which illegal activities were tolerated and even encouraged in the
service of his administration’s top foreign policy goal in Latin America—the removal
from power of Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. Thus, the State Department’s
Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office was contracting with known drug traffickers
while its Bureau of International Narcotics Matters was pressuring Latin American
governments to forcibly eradicate drug crops. The lack of coordination and information
sharing among the CIA, NSC, and the various federal law enforcement agencies assigned
to execute Reagan’s anti-narcotics policy meant that, in practice, Reagan’s foreign policy
team was undermining his stated objectives in the region. To a significant degree, this
lack of coordination was the product of an ideologically-motivated commander-in-chief
uninterested in operational details and more than happy to delegate responsibility for
policy specifics to sometimes overly opportunistic underlings. Here was the central
contradiction of Reagan’s foreign policy: being a big-picture thinker, he refused to
concern himself with the details of policy implementation and was therefore unable to
grasp the consequences of those policies and to reflect on their significance for the
overarching goals of his foreign policy.

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62 Ibid.
The Bush Administration & the Militarization of the Drug War

The presidential administration of George H.W. Bush marked a break from the contradictions generated by an ill-coordinated foreign-policymaking apparatus, while the unholy marriage between drug traffickers and leftist guerrillas offered Bush the opportunity to simultaneously strike both targets. To a large extent, however, the newfound willingness of the Pentagon to engage more actively in the drug war was the product of a change in leadership. Although mid-level institutional resistance to militarizing the drug war persisted, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney designated drug production, trafficking, and abuse as a “high priority national security mission of the Department of Defense.”

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, moreover, the war on drugs became the primary stated foreign policy objective in the Andean coca-producing countries, and the raison d’etre for maintaining and even increasing defense spending. Cheney was forthright in his opposition to congressionally-approved budget cuts. He remained skeptical about Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s stated intention to pare down Soviet strategic weapons reserves and criticized colleagues he felt were too eager to cut back on U.S. military spending in response to Gorbachev’s pledges. “It is as if they had decided to give away their overcoats on the first sunny day in January,” Cheney complained.

In his first address to the nation as President, Bush tackled the subject of drug abuse, conveying a dark vision of a nation beset by grave danger. Claiming to represent the will of the American people, and declaring that “all of us agree that the gravest

domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs,” he beseeched Americans to “turn on the evening news or pick up the morning paper;” so they could see for themselves “what some Americans know just by stepping out their front door: our most serious problem today is cocaine, and in particular, crack.” 65 He described the extent of the drug menace: “No one among us is out of harm’s way. When four-year-olds play in playgrounds strewn with discarded hypodermic needles and crack vials—it breaks my heart. When cocaine—one of the most deadly and addictive illegal drugs—is available to school kids—school kids—it’s an outrage. And when hundreds of thousands of babies are born each year to mothers who use drugs—premature babies born desperately sick—then even the most defenseless among us are at risk.” 66

Governor Bob Martinez, Bush’s director of drug policy, waxed philosophical on the dangers of drug abuse, pronouncing “that threats to democracy come not only from tyrants and the secret police, but also from bad decisions made by free citizens about how to live their lives.” 67 Describing the potential epidemic of drug abuse as a “national emergency,” Martinez held forth on the everyday horrors faced by millions of Americans: “People lived in fear in their homes; they prayed as their children made their way to school; they worried about their safety in the workplace.” The situation was so grave and the threat so dire, that for all intents and purposes, a “domestic issue—fear of drugs—had replaced fear of war, typically the greatest long-term fear, as the greatest concern of Americans.” 68 Martinez appealed to history and a sense of American national

66 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
greatness and destiny, asking, “Had our ancestors fought valiantly for liberty only to see it squandered in crack houses and back alleys? Was blood spilled at Gettysburg and in the Argonne and at Normandy to make the world safe for bongs and cocaine parties and marijuana smoke-ins?”

After establishing the nature and scope of the domestic threat posed by drug abuse, and invoking the historical greatness of American national character, Martinez moved on to the issue of Peru, clearly establishing a link between the drug problem in America and the militarization of the drug war in the Andes. He claimed that Peruvian public opinion favored the militarization of the drug war, and lamented that despite the Bush administration’s commitment to providing that country’s government with security and law enforcement assistance to attack the source of two-thirds of the world’s cocaine, the opposition of misguided opponents was delaying the provision of funds. Martinez demanded compliance with the administration’s policies: “The administration wants this assistance provided now and we will fight for it.”

The Bush administration’s rhetoric, combined with the increasingly sensationalistic news media portrayals of crackheads, crack houses, and crack babies, powerfully influenced American public opinion on the nature and extent of the drug problem, and the most effective strategies for solving it. According to a California poll conducted in October 1992, sixty-five percent of respondents were “extremely concerned” about illegal drug use, and twenty-four percent were “somewhat concerned.”

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69 Ibid., p. 2.
70 Ibid., p. 9, emphasis in original.
71 Source: California Poll, The Field Institute, San Francisco, October 8, 1992. Respondents were asked, “How concerned are you about illegal drug use?”
percent of respondents agreed that “cocaine has a very negative impact on our society.”

Zero percent of those polled thought that cocaine had no negative impact on American society.\textsuperscript{72} The American public was, of course, already convinced of the grave threat to the nation’s moral fabric and the necessity of marshaling the U.S. military to fight the war on drugs. When asked whether the U.S. government should concentrate its efforts on preventing the supply of drugs from entering the country or on preventing Americans from using drugs, fifty percent of those polled said the government should reduce supply, thirty-five percent thought the government should concentrate on demand, and fifteen percent were undecided.\textsuperscript{73} Sixty-one percent of participants in a \textit{New York Times} poll thought that, “the US should use the military to try to stop the flow of illegal drugs from coming into this country.”\textsuperscript{74}

The militarization of the drug war in the Andes thus progressed unimpeded by an American public wary of U.S. foreign entanglements. NSD-18 expanded the rules of engagement for Special Ops Forces operating in South America, committed the U.S. military to the fight against Sendero, and created an “Andean initiative,” providing over $261 million in law enforcement support to the Andean nations of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. The initiative also pledged an additional $2 billion in incentives for cooperating with U.S.-sponsored programs. NSD-18 was enacted despite the concerns of some Pentagon officials that the Upper Huallaga was a war zone, and despite complaints from

\textsuperscript{72} Source: West Virginia Poll, Ryan Samples Research, Charleston, January 1992. Respondents were asked to, “Please rate the negative impact of the following drugs on our society as a whole. For example, do you believe that cocaine has a very negative impact on our society, somewhat of a negative impact on our society, very little impact, or no impact on our society?”


\textsuperscript{74} Source: CBS News/New York Times Poll, July 11, 1988. Twenty-nine percent of respondents thought the U.S. military should stay out of the drug war.
some quarters that the problem of drug production in the Andes required an economic, not military, solution.

While Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori repeatedly insisted that the coca problem was at heart an economic one that could not be solved by military means, the Bush administration continued to press for the militarization of the drug war in the Andes, conditioning the provision of economic aid to the Peruvian government on counter-narcotics performance and acceptance of military assistance. Support for Peru’s counter-insurgency efforts was premised on the necessity of establishing security in coca production zones to better facilitate crop eradication and alternative development schemes. Ironically, however, U.S. officials continued to premise the success of counter-narcotics efforts on counter-insurgency even after it had become apparent that President Fujimori was unwilling to sanction chemical coca eradication.

Fujimori realized that the success of any Peruvian counter-narcotics program hinged on the support of coca growers, who had become alienated to the point of violence by crop eradication. During a press conference at the drug summit held in San Antonio in 1992, Fujimori questioned whether it was possible “to take repressive measures in Peru without violating the rights of the campesinos that grow coca without taking them to their

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deaths by bullets or hunger.’’ Fujimori interpreted guerrilla involvement in coca production in a way meant to justify U.S. support for Peruvian counter-insurgency missions and explained the evolution of the relationship between Sendero and the coca campesinos: “if the police with the assistance of the DEA, if the Armed Forces enter into the coca farmers’ settlements with repressive measures violating all kinds of rights then it is obvious that they have to defend themselves. They can’t do it on their own because they are poor farmers. They will turn to those at hand, Sendero offered them this protection. Well then, we do not wish to continue with this paradox of repressing the campesinos so that they, in turn, associate themselves with Sendero.” Thus, Fujimori unwittingly located the origins of the Sendero partnership with the campesinos in the misguided crop eradication policies of the Reagan administration.

The Agency for International Development lobbied for alternative development schemes to re-invigorate the agricultural sector by developing infrastructure and creating an economic climate in which the cultivation of licit crops would be more profitable than growing coca. AID officials shared Fujimori’s emphasis on economic development, arguing that although establishing government control over coca-growing regions in Peru was necessary, development and security were linked in a way that required the simultaneous pursuit of both goals. Indeed, the alternative development program “will help to bring about security by developing a positive economic climate.”

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78 Ibid.

the relationship between security and development was more complex than the Bush administration had acknowledged, AID refuted the universal applicability of military solutions to the security dilemma, arguing that “in some locations the army’s presence will just complicate matters.”

U.S. ambassador to Peru Anthony Quainton reported to the State Department his flexibility in “matching the Peruvian priority in fighting terrorism with the American priority for fighting drug trafficking.” The inclusion of the term narco-terrorism in the vocabulary of the drug warriors indicated a willingness on the part of U.S. officials to appeal to the interests of the Peruvian government, in part by modifying the language used to convey the problem. Ambassador Quainton assured his counterparts in Peru that the U.S. sought a “comprehensive agreement to fight narco-terrorism,” but only provided “that Peru would have to draft a comprehensive strategy…in the Upper Huallaga where Sendero operates in combination with drug traffickers.”

Indeed, State Department officials recognized that the nature of the counter-narcotics mission in the Andes, which amounted to a state of guerrilla warfare on the ground, could become a liability for the administration. The ambiguity surrounding the relationship between leftist guerrillas, coca growers, and drug traffickers meant that it was extremely difficult to actually distinguish between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency. Nevertheless, it was important for the Bush administration to continue making the distinction, lest U.S. military intervention in the Andes create a backlash.

80 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
State Department officials suggested that, “there are some low-cost, politically non-controversial steps which could be taken to improve the GOP’s [Government of Peru] capability to combat Sendero.”

Growing awareness of the human rights atrocities committed by the Peruvian military and security forces led some Congressional leaders to firmly oppose the continued provision of aid to Peru. The administration insisted that despite widespread human rights abuses, fortifying Peru’s military was essential to securing the Peruvian government’s control over the Upper Huallaga Valley. Perhaps counter-intuitively, in light of the positive correlation between U.S. military assistance and Peruvian human rights violations, Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger even insisted that, “a program of security assistance which included the Army would assist President Fujimori in improving that organization’s human rights performance.”

Given that the State Department’s own report on human rights in Peru had acknowledged that “security forces personnel were responsible for widespread and egregious human rights violations,” and that “there were widespread credible reports of summary executions, arbitrary detentions and torture and rape by the military,” this argument was particularly dubious.

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86 Quoted in a letter to Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger from Dante Fascell, Chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, September 24, 1991. Letters were also sent to other congressional opponents of further military assistance to Peru, including Senators Patrick Leahy and David Obey. The State Department report on human rights abuses in Peru was issued in February 1991. File: Peru, General: July 1991 – December 1991 [2], [OA/ID CF01371-011]. Gillespie, Charles A.: Files, Subject File, National Security Council, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.
Despite reassurances from the Bush administration that restrictions on the activities of U.S. personnel stationed in the Andes would remain in effect, the reality on the ground was a virtual state of war. The U.S. counter-narcotics base in the Santa Lucia department of the Upper Huallaga, built in 1987 and manned by DEA and State Department personnel in addition to Peruvian security forces and eradication workers, was a target for the attacks of Sendero Luminoso, bringing U.S. officials into direct, often violent conflict with the Maoist insurgents.87

Nevertheless, Bush administration officials continued to emphasize that, “U.S. military personnel will be involved in the Andes in a counternarcotics support role only.”88 In practice, this distinction meant little, however, as DEA agents stationed in the Andean countries had “crossed the line, from the commonly accepted role of domestic narcotic law enforcement, to the role of an infantry combat advisor.” DEA Chief Frank White argued that, “This line, whether we want to accept it or not, was crossed when…agents started to wear camouflage jungle uniforms, and jump out of Huey helicopters, carrying M-16 rifles.”89 A State Department report on international narcotics control programs in Peru and Bolivia conceded that the DEA, “an agency which does not

have military expertise, is charged with conducting INM-funded paramilitary operations.”

Although Cheney’s leadership style and desire to maintain, and even bolster defense spending clearly contributed substantially to the Defense Department’s expanded role in the drug war, institutional reluctance on the part of the Pentagon to engage in counter-narcotics efforts was jettisoned also because of the changing nature of the Andean struggle. As the drug war shifted toward combating leftist guerrillas like Shining Path, the U.S. military became more enthusiastic about participating in the battle. One military official was quoted as saying, “We’re going back to what we know best. How to fight the commies.”

Conclusion

Thus, with the fall of the Soviet Union, drugs became public enemy number one, and the drug war justified an increased U.S. military presence in the Andes, a region struggling with extreme poverty and its dire social and political consequences. U.S. operatives were positioned on the front line of a losing war against a well-armed opposition that violently rejected what it perceived as U.S. imperialism under a new guise—that of combating domestic drug abuse. The mobilization of public opinion in support of U.S. interventions abroad is a particularly interesting aspect of the foreign policy of the drug war. While rejecting U.S. support for the contras, and by extension, a

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military solution to the threats posed by communist-inspired governments or movements in foreign countries—even those considered America’s “backyard”—the American public actively supported the expansion of the U.S. military’s role in the war on drugs. The public was of course unaware that in practice this role amounted to a battle against leftist guerrillas, and had little or no impact on the flow of drugs across the border. But many U.S. officials clearly understood these implications of counter-narcotics policies. No matter the intentions of the legions of American drug warriors—and clearly, those intentions are myriad, and often conflicting—the result of the drug war on the ground in the Andes has been the perpetuation of a U.S. military presence in a region beset by civil war and leftist insurgent movements. In the absence of the all-consuming specter of a menacing Soviet third-world expansionism, the drug war became the bogey against which Cold War-style paramilitary intervention was sanctioned at the highest levels of the U.S. government.
Friends in High Places: Personality and Politics in Anastasio Somoza García’s Nicaragua

Introduction

When the sun rose on 21 September 1956, Anastasio “Tacho” Somoza García had every reason to celebrate. The President of Nicaragua and Chief of the National Guard had recently announced his decision to seek re-election and formally accepted the nomination to run as the National Liberal Party’s candidate. It was a mere formality for a man who had controlled the reins of power in Nicaragua since 1936, but it was a reason to have a lavish party. On the evening of 21 September 1956, Somoza sat at the head table overlooking the dance floor and shared a relaxed conversation with his wife and close friends. No one saw the stranger who danced towards the head table until he began to fire at Somoza.¹

Thomas E. Whelan, the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, immediately notified President Eisenhower, who ordered a medical team from Gorgas Hospital in the Canal Zone, Panama, to fly to Nicaragua to provide medical assistance to Somoza. As Somoza’s condition worsened, President Eisenhower arranged to have Somoza transported to the Canal Zone and sent Major General Leonard Heaton, Commander of Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital, and two other medical specialists to the hospital to attempt a live-saving surgery.² Despite these valiant efforts, Anastasio Somoza García died on 29 September 1956.³

At first glance, the American response to the assassination of Anastasio Somoza García seemed unusual. President Eisenhower and Ambassador Whelan went to great lengths to save the life of a single man, who was neither their relative nor an American citizen. Was it simply an act of compassion? Despite the fact that compassion certainly played a role in the decision to send medical aid, this explanation left much to be desired. It seemed doubtful that President Eisenhower would have made similar efforts for other heads of state. Both President Eisenhower and Ambassador Whelan could have

² Ibid.
simply expressed wishes for a speedy recovery or offered other messages of support. The story of Somoza’s assassination and the American response leads an important question that will be the focus of this essay. Why did President Eisenhower go to such lengths to save Anastasio Somoza García’s life? While these questions appear simple, it is by answering them that we can gain greater insight into U.S. relations with Nicaragua, and Central America as a whole, during this period. In addition, we will gain insight into the role of charisma and personality in foreign relations.

The political career of Somoza provides a fascinating opportunity to explore these questions and their implications. In fact, one can seldom read about Somoza in primary or secondary literature without learning about his outgoing personality and its affect on those around him. William Krehm, a reporter for *Time*, notes that Matthew E. Hanna, U.S. Minister to Nicaragua from 1929 until 1933, and his wife were “bewitched” by Somoza; Mrs. Hanna found Somoza to be a “charming dancing partner.” In another article from the same publication, Major General Henry Vaughn, an Aide to President Truman, stated that Somoza, “could easily have been President of the United States. After all, he and Harry [Truman were] just alike. They both like[d] the same things—a friendly poker game, a good story, and a stiff drink.” These sentiments were particularly evident in news reports published after the assassination. A reporter for the *New York Times* noted that, “General Somoza exercised his charm on several important members of the diplomatic corps in Managua. He danced an excellent tango and rumba.” Although dancing skills and a jovial nature have never been requirements for successful foreign relations, it is clear that Somoza’s unique ability to build personal relationships with diplomats, military personnel, and their spouses affected the way in which they interacted with Somoza and Nicaragua. In this essay, I will argue that Somoza built personal ties with influential U.S. military and civilian leaders in order to gain access to positions of power available to him in Nicaragua. Once in power, Somoza became a willing and eager client to the United States, even when the United States had little desire to serve as Nicaragua’s patron.

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However, it was Somoza’s steadfast and reliable support of the United States that made American policymakers fear life without Somoza.

**Background: “In Our Backyard”**

As the United States began to increase its territory, wealth and power, Latin America became a region of special importance. As former colonies of the Old World, they shared a common origin. More importantly, the distance between these New World states was so insignificant relative to Europe that many Americans came to feel as though these countries existed in “our backyard.” This attitude was evident in American foreign policy, public opinion, and individual actions.

The Monroe Doctrine was one of the earliest expressions of this “backyard” mentality in a statement of U.S. foreign policy. In an address to Congress in 1823, President Monroe stated that although the United States would respect European claims to their existing colonies,

> …any interposition for the purpose of oppressing [governments who have gained and maintained their freedom], or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power [shall be viewed] as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition towards the United States.\(^7\)

Despite the apparent concern for the sovereignty of the recently established Latin American states, this doctrine was much more concerned about the sovereignty of the United States and its desire to limit European influence in its “backyard.” In these early stages of the “backyard” mentality, the expression of U.S. interests in the affairs of its southern neighbors was defensive and preventative. As time passed, these sentiments became more aggressive and took on a greater role in the public sphere.

Over a period of twenty years, the defensive posture of the Monroe Doctrine gave way to an assertive popular outlook regarding the relationship between the United States and its neighbors. This outlook, more commonly known as Manifest Destiny, suggested that “Providence” had ordained that the United States would ultimately include all of the land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Some enthusiasts even suggested that several Central American countries would be included in the Union as well. In fact, a statement in *DeBow’s Commercial Review*, a widely circulated southern industrial and

commercial magazine, suggested that the territorial gains from the Mexican-American War were just the beginning. “We will have Old Mexico and Cuba! The isthmus cannot arrest—nor even the Saint Lawrence!! ….A hundred states will grow up where now exists but thirty.” Although it is true that this quotation does not represent public opinion as a whole, it does represent a way of looking at America’s Central American neighbors that scholars can identify in a variety of other documents during this era.

More importantly, if actions speak louder than words, then the actions of the American filibusters, their financial backers, and other supporters stand as a testament to the popularity of Manifest Destiny within the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. While the term “filibuster” is commonly associated with American politics, it originated as a term to describe irregular, military adventurers who engaged in unauthorized military expeditions in foreign countries. These adventurers sought to establish colonies throughout Central America with the hopes of “civilizing” the region and expanding the territory controlled by the United States. William Walker, the most famous filibuster of his time, attempted to establish a colony in Sonora, Mexico before Walker and 300 mercenaries traveled to Nicaragua to support the Liberals in the on-going civil war. The so-called “Grey Eyed Man of Destiny” eventually appointed himself “general in chief” of the Nicaraguan Army and arranged to be elected President of Nicaragua in 1856. Though Walker’s initial success was unusual, he was not alone in his efforts. Other, less well-known filibusters, such as A.K. Cutting and Colonel Henry Kinney, attempted to expand America’s “backyard” into Mexico and Nicaragua, respectively. From the actions of the

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9 Karl Berman, Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States since 1848, (Boston: South End Press, 1986), 53-4. Six months after the Sonora colony was established, it failed and Walker and his remaining colonists fled across the California border with Mexican irregular forces in pursuit. Walker was charged with violating U.S. neutrality laws, but was acquitted in October 1884.

10 Ibid., 55.

11 Ibid., 57 and 64. Walker’s assumption of the presidency inspired the Liberal and Conservative forces to put aside their differences and fight with armies from other Central American states to remove Walker from office. As a result, in May 1857, Commander Charles Davis negotiated for the safe passage for Walker and his remaining men. Walker attempted to return to Nicaragua several times until he was captured by the British, turned over to the Honduran government, and executed by firing squad on 12 September 1860.

inspired individuals, it is clear that the United States’ interest in Central America extended beyond foreign policy and took hold of the imagination of the public at large. Now, we will turn to the factors that bolstered the growing American interest in Central America and Nicaragua, in particular.

As the territories of the United States began to expand towards the West, people became concerned about how to improve the transport of people and goods to the far reaches of the Union. Before the completion of the transcontinental railway, Central America offered an alternative to the difficult and dangerous wagon trails. Several American businessmen explored the possibility of building roads, railroads, and even a canal to improve travel time between the east coast of the United States and California. Upon the discovery of gold in California, these efforts became more urgent and more profitable. In 1869, the completed transcontinental railway began to meet the demand for passenger transport to California, but was unable to transport large freight to California. Consequently, the United States pursued the possibility of building a canal in Nicaragua, which appeared to be a more cost effective choice than Panama. Although the canal was not built in Nicaragua, its proximity to the Panama Canal caused it to remain in an area of increased U.S. interest. In addition to travel, Central America provided the United States with a number of raw materials, such as timber, coffee, and bananas, for American businesses and a market ripe for the sale of finished, manufactured products. According to a 1954 Operation Coordination Board report, Latin America had become so important to the economy of the United States that it was, “as important as all of Europe and more important than all other continents combined.” In light of the American interest in Central America, we will now examine how scholars have described the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States during the political career of Anastasio Somoza García.

Historiography

13 Berman, Under the Big Stick, 104.
14 Ibid., 115 and 118.
16 Ibid., 20.
Despite his mention in a variety of scholarly texts on twentieth-century Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza García does not play a large role in the historiography of this era. In the instances in which Somoza is discussed by scholars, it is often in order to provide background to explain the ascent of his youngest son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, to the office of President of Nicaragua, the challenge of the leftist Sandinistas to his government, and U.S. support to the Contras after the Sandinistas came to power. However, this tendency has not deterred some scholars from analyzing Somoza, his relationships with various U.S. Administrations, and the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua during this era. One of the earliest scholarly inquiries on this topic was Duncan Osborne’s thesis, “The Assassination of Anastasio Somoza,” submitted in 1968. In this work, Osborne provides a detailed reconstruction of the events related to the assassination based on interviews with individuals, such as then-President Anastasio Somoza Debayle, memoirs, and newspaper accounts. He argues that the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua was not close and that the United States viewed Somoza as the lesser of several evils.17 Osborne’s thesis points toward new areas of investigation based on his suggestion that the U.S. conspired with Somoza’s sons to release falsely optimistic health reports about Somoza to allow his sons time to solidify their political power in the country.18

Despite the need for additional scholarly inquiry, eighteen years passed before this matter was examined again. In 1986, Karl Berman published Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States since 1848, a work that comments on U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and Latin America as a whole. He argues that many of Nicaragua’s contemporary problems are the result of U.S. interventions since 1848. Placing Somoza in this context, Berman recognizes the close relationship between the two countries, which was evident in the location of the U.S. Embassy within the compound containing the Presidential palace and other Somoza family residences, and the close relationship between Ambassador Whelan and Somoza.19 Despite the political motivation that inspired Berman to write this monograph,20 Under the Big Stick...

17 Duncan E. Osborne, "The Assassination of Anastasio Somoza," (University of Texas at Austin, 1968), 36.
18 Ibid., 116.
19 Berman, Under the Big Stick, 242-3.
Ross, 7

*Stick* is an ambitious work that influenced many of the following works on this period in Nicaraguan history.

In his book, *The United States and Somoza, 1933-1956: A Revisionist Look*, Paul Clark, Jr. challenges the close U.S.-Nicaraguan relationship suggested by Berman and argues that it is a myth bolstered by the close relationships that Somoza had with certain American military and civilian officials. Clark pushes the argument further by maintaining that Somoza and other contemporary Latin American dictators manipulated the non-interventionist elements of the Good Neighbor Policy to their benefit because they were secure in the knowledge that the U.S. would not intervene regardless of their actions. However, this relationship changed when ardent anti-communist sentiments in the United States provided Somoza an opportunity to redeem his standing with the government. Although his discussion of Somoza’s assassination is limited to a single page, he does attempt to explain the American medical assistance by pointing to Ambassador Whelan’s request for assistance. As one of the first published works to examine the Somoza regime on its own merit, Clark’s research goes a long way to adding nuance to this overlooked period in Nicaraguan historiography. Unfortunately, the very limited discussion of the assassination and its aftermath underestimates the importance of this event.

Unlike the aforementioned scholars, Knut Walter takes a more positive view of the regime of Anastasio Somoza. In his monograph by that title, Walter contends that Somoza led the transformation of Nicaragua into a modern state. With regards to Somoza’s assassination, Walter argues that the regime was never in danger of collapsing due to the swift actions taken by Somoza’s sons in the hours and days following the assassination. Though this argument seems reasonable, it is based on hindsight and does not take seriously the fears and concerns of political leaders living during this era. If a smooth transition

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20 In his introduction, Berman explains that he wrote this book in response to contemporary calls for intervention in Nicaragua against the Sandinista government.


22 Ibid., 191-2 and 198.

was guaranteed, why did the Somoza brothers act so quickly to consolidate their power and ensure the support of the National Guard? While it is true that the Somoza brothers used their time wisely prior to their father’s death, there was more doubt and uncertainty during the days following the assassination than Walter’s reasoning suggests.

In a return to a thread of inquiry began in Clark’s work, Michael Krenn explores the role of anti-communist sentiment in the U.S.-Central American relationship in The Chains of Interdependence: U.S. Policy Toward Central America, 1945-1954. According to Krenn, U.S. policy makers chose to support anti-communist dictators and repressive pro-American regimes in Central America despite having better options available. He goes on to argue that the United States only became interested in Central America after the Guatemala “Crisis” in 1953. With respect to the U.S. estimation of Somoza’s Nicaragua during this era, Krenn notes that Somoza was one of the leaders who succeeded in maintaining a state that was almost free of communist activities. Krenn’s analysis in this text highlights the value of Somoza as an anti-communist leader during an era in which fears of the “red tide” permeated discussions in the United States government. Unfortunately, Krenn conflates lack of interest in Central America with a conscious policy decision to promote democracy in the world, and especially in America’s “backyard.”

The most recent work on the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua during the Somoza regime is Michael Gambone’s 1997 book, Eisenhower, Somoza, and the Cold War in Nicaragua, 1953-1961. In this text, Gambone builds on Berman’s discussion of the negative consequences of U.S. intervention in order to highlight the Eisenhower Administration’s concern about communist efforts to harness anti-American nationalism in Central and Latin America. Additionally, he argues against Walter’s assumption that a stable transition to the Somoza sons was inevitable by noting that no person,

25 Ibid., 31, 42, 48.
26 Clark, The United States and Somoza, xvii.

It is important to note that the validity of this concern is meaningless when many reasonable decision makers perceive this threat to be real.
in America or Nicaragua, thought that the National Guard would follow either Luis or Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Regrettably, Gambone’s timeline for the assassination is incorrect and he provides no analysis to suggest that the accepted timeline has been altered or is the result of a larger conspiracy.\textsuperscript{28}

However, Gambone’s work does provide a productive framework through which to analyze the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States. He suggests that the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua during this period was essentially a patron-client relationship. According to Gambone, patronage exists when a powerful state is able to control the activities of a less powerful state for its own benefit.\textsuperscript{29} He also notes that the weaker state can also serve as a partner, or valuable client, in support of the stronger partner’s objectives.\textsuperscript{30} By exploring the U.S.-Nicaraguan relationship and Somoza’s efforts in this light, it is possible to arrive at a more complete understanding of how Anastasio Somoza García rose to power and how the relationship he built with high level U.S. leaders motivated their efforts to save his life.

**Somoza’s Rise to Power**

Anastasio Somoza García was born on 1 February 1896 in San Marcos, Nicaragua. His family was upper middle class and lived on the coffee plantation owned by his father, Anastasio Somoza Reyes. After attending school in Managua, Somoza studied business administration and accounting in Philadelphia at the Pierce School where he was awarded a degree in business administration.\textsuperscript{31} It was during his time in Philadelphia that Somoza met his future wife, Salvadora Debayle, the daughter of a prominent Nicaraguan family.\textsuperscript{32} As a means of adding to his income, Somoza worked as a used car salesman,\textsuperscript{33} which may have provided him with the opportunity to hone skills that would come into good use later during his political career in Nicaragua. Additionally, he perfected his English speaking ability,

\textsuperscript{28} Gambone states that Somoza was shot on 23 Sept 1956 (not 21 Sept 1956) and died three days later (as opposed to eight days later). Since some scholars have suggested that there may have been a conspiracy involved in delaying the death announcement, this discrepancy may be noteworthy.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{31} According to Karl Bermann, Somoza’s parents sent him to live with an uncle in Philadelphia after the family discovered his illicit relationship with the maid. See Berman, *Under the Big Stick*, 219.

\textsuperscript{32} Duncan E. Osborne, "The Assassination of Anastasio Somoza," (University of Texas at Austin, 1968), 1-2.

\textsuperscript{33} Berman, *Under the Big Stick*, 220.
a skill that would take him far upon his return to Nicaragua. Once at home, Somoza pursued several business opportunities, all of which failed. Eventually, he gained a position serving as a translator for American officials working in Nicaragua. More specifically, Somoza worked closely with the military officials that were forming and training Nicaragua’s new National Guard. It is this position as a translator that served as a springboard for the ambitious young Somoza, who transformed his assignment as a translator into a unique path to the Presidential palace. Now, we will take a closer look at that path.

Somoza’s path to power has its roots in the 1926 Liberal uprising in support of Juan Sacasa and the 1927 peace agreement that was negotiated by the United States, known as the Peace of Tipitapa. It was during this time that Somoza began to distinguish himself as a translator. Eventually, he was appointed to serve as Nicaragua’s Minister of Foreign Affairs under President Jose Moncada.

At the same time, another influential figure in Nicaraguan history, Augusto Cesar Sandino, a general who had fought for the Liberals, rose to prominence. Unlike Somoza, who sought to benefit from the presence of American officials in his country, Sandino, a man vehemently opposed to the American presence, refused to lay down his arms after the signing of the peace treaty without the complete withdrawal of the Marines from Nicaraguan soil. For the next five years, Sandino and his forces successfully drew the Marines into a guerilla war that ended only after the Marines left Nicaragua following the 1932 election of President Juan Sacasa.

Prior to the Marine’s departure, Minister Hanna recommended that President Sacasa appoint Somoza to serve as the Chief of the National Guard, a recommendation with which Sacasa complied. Furthermore, the newly elected President was assigned the task of making peace with Sandino and his rebel forces. As Sacasa and Sandino worked towards a peace agreement, Somoza became dissatisfied with the process and the fact that Sacasa had permitted Sandino to maintain approximately 100 armed men for Sandino’s protection. Somoza saw this group of armed men who were outside of his control as

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34 Berman, *Under the Big Stick*, 220.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 216.
37 Berman, *Under the Big Stick*, 217.
Chief of the National Guard as a threat to his personal power and his organization. Consequently, on 21 February 1934, as Sandino and his aides were departing a dinner meeting with President Sacasa, National Guard Soldiers arrested Sandino and his men, took them to the Managua airfield, and murdered them.\textsuperscript{38}

Following Sandino’s murder, Somoza continued to solidify his power base within the National Guard. As Somoza began to exercise his new political strength, President Sacasa quickly realized that the Head of the National Guard was also a challenge to his authority. On several occasions, Sacasa sought the advice and assistance of the State Department in dealing with his rogue military leader.\textsuperscript{39} As this was during the United States’ Good Neighbor Policy, no advice or assistance of any kind was forthcoming. Tensions between Sacasa and Somoza rose to such a level that few were surprised when Somoza’s National Guard surrounded the Presidential palace and forced Sacasa to resign in June of 1936. On 1 January 1937, Anastasio Somoza García was inaugurated President of Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{40}

A wealth of information can be gleaned from a close analysis of the events that preceded Somoza’s inauguration as President of Nicaragua. The issues that are most relevant to our present discussion are the importance of Somoza’s use of family connections, his personality and his political skill. Although his education and English proficiency were essential to preparing him for future opportunities, it is clear that many of those opportunities would not have been available to him without his ability to make use of his family’s social and political connections. While he was certainly qualified to work as a translator, Somoza may not have been able to get the job as easily if it had not been for his wife’s family connections. These connections to influential individuals in Nicaragua placed Somoza in a position to be able to utilize his skills and talents to impress the Americans for whom he worked. While he was working as a translator, his proficiency and his personality added to his success with his employers. In many American officials’ recollections of their experiences with the young Somoza, many begin their comments by commenting with admiration at his effortless use of the English language. Moreover, his lively and outgoing personality disarmed the Americans with whom he interacted and

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Clark, \textit{The United States and Somoza}, 22.
\textsuperscript{40} Berman, 224.
Ross, 12

created an environment in which close personal bonds could be formed. This mix of competence and sociability worked well for Somoza. He built such a close relationship with several Marine officers that he gained the nickname, “the Yankee.” More importantly, Somoza charmed Minister Hanna, who later recommended Somoza to command the National Guard. In a letter endorsing Somoza as his choice to lead the National Guard, Hanna stated that,

I look upon him as the best man in the country for the position. I know no one who will labor as intelligently and conscientiously to maintain the nonpartisan character of the Guardia, or will be as efficient in all matters connected with the administration and command of the force.

Clearly, Minister Hanna judged Somoza’s intentions incorrectly, but he was certainly won over by a young man whom he thought was the right man for the job.

As the new Chief of the National Guard, Somoza began to shape the political environment through skillful political maneuvering. As previously mentioned, Somoza viewed Sandino as a challenge to Somoza’s military power. Furthermore, Sandino and his armed men stood as a direct challenge to Somoza’s monopoly on violence in the country. Seeing Sandino as a serious threat, Somoza moved to have Sandino and his aides murdered on 21 Feb 1934. In order to ensure the greatest discredit to his rival’s memory, Somoza followed the murder with a media campaign that portrayed Sandino as a menace to society.

Now that his rival was no longer a factor, Somoza shifted his focus to securing the loyalty and respect of the members of the National Guard. As soon as the political environment began to settle following Sandino’s murder, Somoza endorsed legislation that exonerated the Guardsmen believed to be responsible for the kidnappings and murders. First, this act served as payment and appreciation for the heinous crime. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this act showed that the National Guard’s loyalty to Somoza would be returned and would also have tangible benefits. This went a long way

43 Berman, Under the Big Stick, 221.
44 Ibid., 223.
towards strengthening his control over the National Guard. Finally, Somoza manipulated U.S. non-intervention to create the illusion that his actions had American support.\textsuperscript{45} This tactic served to convince that National Guard that they were allied with a very powerful man who was on his way to the top. Their hopes for success were tied to a man who appeared to be “the right choice.” Additionally, this tactic convinced the wider population that Somoza’s appointment as Head of the National Guard and his subsequent actions against Sandino were sanctioned by the United States.\textsuperscript{46}

The final phase of Somoza’s journey to the Presidential palace involved removing the final obstacle to his ambitions: President Sacasa. Fortunately for Somoza, Sacasa was a weak leader who was losing supporters in the National Congress. Moreover, the Great Depression placed a great economic strain on the national economy at a time when the government was sinking into debt and the national bank was running low on funds.\textsuperscript{47} These economic difficulties multiplied Sacasa’s political problems because there was no consensus on how to reach a resolution. Consequently, there was a great deal of displeasure directed towards Sacasa. Somoza capitalized on this opportunity and positioned himself as an alternative to Sacasa’s inaction; he was a man of action. This image of Somoza is evident in a comment by an unnamed source who believed that, “[while] President Juan Batista Sacasa preside[d] over the government, it [was]…General Anastasio Somoza García who actually control[ed] the destiny of the country by means of… the Guard.”\textsuperscript{48} Once Somoza established de facto control of the state, he only needed Sacasa’s resignation to inaugurate his regime that would begin to build a special relationship with the United States.

**Somoza and the United States: “Winning Friends and Influencing People”**

As President of Nicaragua, Somoza succeeded where Sacasa failed. Not only did Somoza have the support of the National Guard, but he also had the support of the National Congress. More

\textsuperscript{45} Clark, *The United States and Somoza*, 22.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, 33 and 38.
importantly, many Nicaraguans believed that Somoza had the support of the United States because of his friendly relationships with various American military and civilian officials. Though this was not true on 1 January 1937 when he was inaugurated, this assumption evolved into reality during the course of his regime. This shift was as much based on the personal ties that Somoza had already built with various American officials as it was based on Somoza’s performance as a client to the United States. While it is certainly true that some American administrations were less interested in serving as patrons that influenced or intervened in the affairs of foreign countries (Good Neighbor Policy), this did not prevent Somoza from presenting himself, and thus Nicaragua, as a willing client for the United States. Somoza’s efforts to position himself and Nicaragua in the good graces of the United States can be seen in three overlapping areas: supporting the United States, flattering its leaders, and playing into their fears.

As he illustrated in his efforts to strengthen his ties to the National Guard, Somoza understood the importance and value of loyalty. While Nicaragua was limited in what it could offer the United States, it could offer its loyalty and its willingness to assist the United States government in any way that it could. This is precisely what Somoza did. Following dinner with a visiting U.S. congressional delegation in 1939, Somoza offered to provide 40,000 Nicaraguan soldiers to the United States in support of any war in which it was involved. 49 His poignant statement on this matter impressed the visiting delegation to whom it was directed, even though, the details of the offer were unrealistic and stated merely for effect. 50 Two years later, when much of the world was at war, Somoza offered his complete cooperation to the United States and the opportunity to establish military bases on Nicaragua’s Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Additionally, he expressed that, “Nicaraguans are firmly convinced that their interests are parallel with those of the United States, while, I, personally, look upon the United States as my second country.” 51 This offer, which is certainly more realistic, highlights Somoza’s efforts to build ties with the United States. Not only was he welcoming the return of American troops in Nicaragua, but he attempted to show

50 Somoza offered to have 10,000 soldiers available within 24 hours and 40,000 soldiers available within 60 days. It is unclear from the news report if the 40,000 soldiers were to be in addition to the previous 10,000 or not.
that he, and Nicaraguans as a whole, believed that the fate of Nicaragua was intertwined with the fate of the United States. Furthermore, Somoza’s statement illustrates that he understood one of the many truths of unequal relationships; what is important to your superior should also be important to you.

Even after World War II, Somoza continued to support American initiatives in the region. One such initiative, the School of the Americas, is an excellent example of Somoza’s enthusiastic support. According to Lesley Gill, 25% of all students at the school came from Nicaragua during the Somoza regime. This particular American initiative offered the unusual opportunity to improve the training of the National Guard, support a new U.S. program, and strengthen U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. The high attendance levels of the National Guard at the School of the Americas after World War II is of particular importance because the existence of the program calls into question the argument that U.S. was not interested in Central America until 1953. More importantly, it illustrates Somoza’s continued efforts to show his ardent support of the United States and to present Nicaragua as a valuable client, or ally, to the United States.

As a savvy politician, who owed much of his success to opportunities provided by his wife’s powerful relatives, Somoza understood another important facet of patron-client relationships: flattery. Though the spectrum of flattery could range from simple appreciation to more extravagant expressions of thanks, Somoza comprehended the importance of showing appreciation and respect. This was especially true during the Roosevelt administration. Somoza had a great deal of respect for Roosevelt, whose picture he displayed in his office. In fact, his respect for Roosevelt was so profound that he declared Roosevelt’s birthday to be a national holiday in Nicaragua. Although similar declarations of national holidays celebrating American leaders and heroes were not widespread during Somoza’s regime, there was a certain amount of flattery that was incorporated into many of Somoza’s dealing with the United States. Even in the previous examples of Somoza’s unwavering support for U.S. policies and initiatives

53 Knut Walter, The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 45.
there was an element of flattery involved in the way that he made his offers of support. Additionally, reporters often quoted statements praising U.S. policy in Somoza’s public statements and speeches. In 1940 and 1941, and certainly other times as well, Somoza praised Roosevelt’s wisdom in making a variety of policies.\footnote{“Somoza Backs Roosevelt,” \textit{New York Times (1857-Current file)}, 16 April 1940, 3; “Somoza Hails Roosevelt,” \textit{New York Times (1857-Current file)}, 22 Jan 1941, 11.} One of these policies was the Good Neighbor Policy in which President Roosevelt proclaimed that no state had the right to intervene in the internal or external matters of another state. While it is certainly true that Somoza appreciated the Good Neighbor Policy because it had provided an environment in which he was able to officially take the reins of government without fear of American intervention, he did not seem critical of many American actions. This seems noteworthy because it seems unlikely that two governments would agree on major foreign policy issues without some reservations or qualifications. In a Memo by Ambassador Whelan describing Somoza’s birthday message, Whelan noted that Somoza praised “U.S. action[s …to] defend Formosa against Soviet totalitarianism, [and appreciated…] U.S. sacrifices in Korea on behalf of peace and security.”\footnote{Thomas E. Whelan, "Reference President Somoza's Birthday Message," edited by Department of State, Managua, 1955.} In addition to the praise evident in this statement, it is clear that Somoza also recognized the high priority that United States placed on the struggle against Communism. In the section that follows, we will explore Somoza’s response to American anti-Communist rhetoric and the manner in which he manipulated these concerns for his own benefit.

In hindsight, it is clear that Americans have overestimated the Communist threat on numerous occasions. However, as tensions rose between the United States and the Soviet Union, contemporary U.S. policymakers had many reasons to believe that the threat of Communism was real. Central America was an area of special interest to the United States during this period. Not only were these countries in “our backyard,” but they were also in close proximity to the Panama Canal, a vital asset to the American economy and military strategy. This concern is clearly evident in one of the contemporary news reports the described the Communist threat in Guatemala and suggested that crises arising from the Guatemalan’s
purchase of Czech weapons would continue in the future. Somoza was well aware of these concerns and did not miss an opportunity to exploit those concerns. For example, after receiving confirmation of the assassination of Panamanian President Jose Antonio Remón, Somoza warned Ambassador Whelan, “against the traps of International Communism” and the unscrupulous agents who offered to perform terrorist acts on their behalf. Later in this document, Somoza added that the National Guard had recently apprehended 10 individuals, some of whom appeared to be fugitives from Costa Rica, that were armed and possessed large amounts of cash. By the end of that year, Somoza informed Ambassador Whelan that he fully expected an, “imminent revolutionary attempt sparked by [an] invasion from [the] outside.” Despite appearances, this statement was not a cry for help. In this same message, Somoza stressed that he was more than capable of defeating any revolutionary threat. This message served to reinforce U.S. concerns about Communist activities in the region and highlight the ability of the Somoza regime to be an effective ally against the “red tide” in the region. Somoza’s messages and statements added to the other information sources available to the United States government that suggested that this threat was serious. When considered in light of his unwavering support of U.S. policies, and his willingness to help, Somoza’s actions as President illustrate the ways that he was able to build valuable ties to the United States. In view of this connection, we will now examine American perceptions of Nicaragua without Somoza.

**Somoza and the United States: Imagining Nicaragua & Central America without Somoza**

Anastasio Somoza García was a known quantity. Many sources quote President Roosevelt as saying that Somoza was a “sonofabitch, but he’s ours.” Whether or not this statement is true, it is certain that when dealing with Somoza one knew what could be expected. This kind of political certainty

59 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Berman, Under the Big Stick, 228.
in an uncertain world was invaluable. What would life without Somoza bring? No one knew, but all agreed that life without the stability provided by a staunch, anti-Communist, pro-U.S. ally in “our backyard” would be unpleasant. Even before the assassination, American officials began to wonder about the future of Nicaragua. In official correspondence dated 3 January 1952, Gordon Reid asserted that, “Somoza is Nicaragua…. Somoza today is still the most interesting figure in Central America, and for my money, the smartest.”\(^6^3\) Reid went on to say that he believed that an indefinite period of chaos would ensure after Somoza’s departure for Nicaraguan politics.\(^6^4\) The speculation only increased following the assassination. Newspaper articles questioned the ability of the Somoza dynasty to continue.\(^6^5\) It seemed as though no one was betting on the success of the Somoza brothers. In fact, exiled nationals watching events from abroad, such as Rigo Cabezas, expressed their concerns and offered their services to the United States in the hopes that they could replace Somoza as a client.\(^6^6\) Although a few individuals saw Somoza’s assassination as an opportunity for personal gain, many more viewed it as a moment of crisis filled with uncertainty and instability.

As American fears regarding the spread of Communism increased, Somoza’s value as an ally increased. No one questioned Somoza’s ability to maintain the strong anti-communist position of Nicaragua. Even those individuals who sought to overthrow the Somoza regime understood that Somoza provided stability in an unstable region. In a letter from Henry Cabot Lodge to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Lodge recounts a conversation during which Mena-Solórzano, a Nicaraguan man, lobbied for U.S. support for an overthrow of Somoza. Lodge emphasized that, “Nicaragua might become another Guatemala” without a smooth transition and U.S. involvement.\(^6^7\)

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
\(^{66}\) Park Wollam, "Memorandum of Conversation: Nicaragua; Statements of Mr. Rigo Cabezas," edited by Department of State, Managua, 1956.
Although Somoza’s sons would appear to be a logical choice to ensure a smooth transition, foreign and domestic officials did not hold them in high regard. In fact, Gordon Reid believed that, “a larger and more vicious collection of leeches” could hardly be found outside of the Somoza family.  
Within Nicaragua, very few people believed that the National Guard would follow either of the Somoza brothers. Luis Somoza Debayle had experience in the National Congress, but no one considered his political network as extensive enough to maintain power in the manner of his father. Although Colonel Anastasio Somoza Debayle was the Chief of the National Guard, many of his officers did not take him seriously. In fact, several of them joked that Somoza Debayle was the first West Point graduate to receive an Army as a graduation present. Consequently, there were certainly more experienced candidates who had the respect of the National Guard and extensive political connections within Nicaragua. In any case, it was clear to all parties involved that there was no clear choice to replace Somoza and few individuals who could provide the stability and consistent support that he had provided the United States for years. To many leaders on both sides of the Rio Grande, it became clear that there would be little stability in Nicaragua, and perhaps the region, without Somoza.

The Aftermath of the Assassination

The story of Somoza’s assassination does not end with his emergency surgery in Gorgas Hospital. For all of the people involved, the days following the assassination were a time of crisis and uncertainty. The doctors attending to Somoza feared that he would be paralyzed by the bullet that was lodged near his spinal column. In the days following his surgery, Somoza remained unconscious. Despite hopes to the contrary, Anastasio Somoza García died of his wounds on 29 September 1956 at the age of 60. After his death, a military escort transported Somoza’s remains to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church at

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69 Gambone, Eisenhower, Somoza, and the Cold War, 95.
70 Ibid.
Colonel Anastasio Somoza Debayle graduated from West Point in 1946.
Ancon Hill where he lied in state until the requiem high mass the following morning. After the mass, Major General Louis Heath, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Caribbean Command, escorted Somoza’s remains and his family members back to Nicaragua.74

Rigoberto López Pérez, the dancer who shot Somoza, was killed at the scene of the crime by Colonel Camilo Gonzalez, an aide to Somoza. López Pérez, a native of Leon, Nicaragua, was a 27 year old writer who had spent several years living in Mexico and El Salvador.75 There is very little known about the young assassin.

Immediately following Somoza’s shooting, the government declared that Nicaragua was in a state of siege. A strict curfew was established that prevented people from leaving their homes between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. Additionally, the Somoza brothers censored Nicaraguan newspapers. Eventually, the Somoza brothers permitted these newspapers to print the “facts” related to the shooting. Since no one was certain if López Pérez had acted alone, over 200 opposition members were arrested and held for questioning. General Emiliano Chamorro, the 84 year old leader of the Conservative Party, and Dr. Enoc Aguado, an elderly leader of a group of independent Liberals seeking to form another opposition party, were among those individuals held for questioning.76

Politically, the Somoza brothers succeeded beyond the expectations of their critics. The National Congress officially designated Luis Somoza Debayle to complete his father’s term in office.77 The following year, he won the Presidential election and began to serve a six year term. Moreover, Colonel Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza Debayle retained control of the National Guard.78 Ten years after his father’s assassination, Anastasio Somoza Debayle became President of Nicaragua, a position in which he served until he resigned on 6 July 1979.79

74 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Berman, Under the Big Stick, 274.
Conclusion

The Assassination of Anastasio Somoza García and the American efforts to save his life by providing expert medical personnel and equipment has provided an interesting opportunity to explore the role of personality in foreign relations. Though it is true that international politics is greater than one man and his relationships with others, the career of Anastasio Somoza García has illustrated that personality does matter in some instances. While personality may not be enough to change another state’s foreign policy, it may provide access to influential people that would otherwise be out of reach. Along with greater access to individuals in positions of power come opportunities to advance one’s personal and national position.

This was the case for Somoza. He utilized his family ties and his charming nature to gain access to and build relationships with a variety of American military and civilian officials. Over time, this investment paid great dividends by allowing Somoza to gain American support for his appointment as Chief of the National Guard. As Somoza continued to gain political strength inside Nicaragua, he also secured the trust and support of the officers and soldiers of the National Guard, the force behind his demand for President Sacasa’s resignation in 1936.

As President, Somoza continued to charm American officials and their families with his stories, dancing, and lavish speeches. More importantly, Somoza tried to show that Nicaragua, under his steady leadership, was an eager client in a region of great concern to the United States. Although the relationship was unequal by its very nature, it was a relationship in which both parties stood to benefit. Nicaragua would gain American economic and military aid, while the United States would be assured of regional stability and a friendly government in its “backyard.” When faced with the prospect of the loss of their friend and irreplaceable ally at a time when Communist paranoia was high, President Eisenhower, Ambassador Whelan, and other officials in the Eisenhower administration moved quickly to provide medical aid. While they did not approve of or support all of Somoza’s actions, many of these officials believed that, “any other ‘leader’ would do as much as [Somoza], if not more. It might be worse. We can
Unfortunately for Somoza, his political savvy, charm, and personal connections, which had kept him in power for 20 years, were not enough to save his life.

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