



Comments on Panel 25

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PANEL 25: Crisis Management of Management Crisis?: U.S.-Latin America Relations During the Kennedy Years

Chair: **Stephen Rabe**, University of Texas at Dallas

“The Chastening of a Cold Warrior: John Kennedy and Political Extremism in Latin America” by **Jeffrey Bass**, Quinnipiac University

“Kennedy's Fiasco: U.S. Domestic Politics and the Bay of Pigs” by **Steven George**, Ohio University

“The Limits of Hegemony: The Kennedy Administration and the Argentine Coup of 1962” by **Dustin Walcher**, Ohio State University

“Omnipotence and Impotence: The Kennedy Administration's Response to the 1962 Peruvian Coup” by **Michael Neagle**, University of Connecticut

Commentator: **Stephen Rabe**

First, I congratulate the authors for the quality of their papers, for delivering them to me in a timely manner, and for delivering their papers to you within the assigned time. My remarks here may seem critical. But they are designed to be constructive and are given in collegial, good humor.

The 1960s witnessed two major failures of U.S. Cold War policy—the war in Vietnam and the Alliance for Progress. Both failures are usually associated with the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson. What unites the four papers that have been presented here is a search for an explanation for U.S. failures in Latin America during the Kennedy years. In many ways, all four papers attempt to absolve President Kennedy and his administration from those failures in Latin America.

Before we outline and analyze those four papers perhaps we should remind ourselves of what happened to U.S. policy in Latin America during the 1960s.

In March 1961, President Kennedy outlined his grand plan for Latin America—the Alliance for Progress. In his speech, the president pledged to transfer \$20 billion in economic aid to Latin America during the decade. Combined with the \$80 billion that Latin Americans would contribute themselves in domestic savings, the \$100 billion would transform Latin America into a peaceful, progress, prosperous, and democratic region. The Alliance for Progress would mean for Latin America what the Marshall Plan for Latin America had meant for Europe. Latin America would

experience, at a minimum, an economic growth rate of 2.5 percent a year. This economic growth rate would accelerate socio-economic development in all areas of life—literacy rates would increase, infant mortality rates would decline, the landless would farm their own lands, all would have access to potable water, etc. There were over 90 specific goals. This socio-economic progress would take place within constitutional, democratic norms. President Kennedy pledged to place U.S. influence behind decent democratic regimes. In his speech, he notably excluded Fidel Castro's Cuba and Rafael Trujillo's Dominican Republic from the Alliance. The United States would not work with dictatorships of the left or right.

As is well known, the Alliance proved to be a signal failure of U.S. policy. The basic and very modest goal of a 2.5 percent annual increase in economic output was never met. (The 2.5 percent figure was intentionally set low). As such, none of the numerical goals were met. There were, for example, more Latin American children not attending school at the end of the 1960s than at the beginning of the decade. Moreover, sixteen extraconstitutional changes of government rocked the region in the 1960s. As highlighted by the Brazilian military's seizure of power in 1964, South America was about to enter a brutal 25-year period of murderous military rule. Guerilla warfare also broke out in Central America, most notably in Guatemala, that would lead to the murder of hundreds of thousands, mainly by right-wing, anti-Communist groups.

Scholars have offered various explanations to account for these failures. The \$20 billion was inadequate, the Marshall Plan analogy was flawed and there was over reliance on modernization theory, explosive population growth cut into socio-economic gains, Latin America's socio-economic elites resisted meaningful change, the terms of trade and low commodity prices hurt Latin America in the 1960s, President Johnson did not give the same commitment to the program as President Kennedy. So like the war on poverty, the Alliance became a casualty of the war in Vietnam.

In my own studies of Kennedy and Latin America, I have given credence to all of those explanations. But, in the end, I have laid assigned responsibility for failure directly to President Kennedy and his advisors. As I have written, "President Kennedy brought high ideals and noble purposes to his Latin American policy. Ironically, however, his unwavering determination to wage Cold War in what he called the most dangerous area in the world led him and his administration ultimately to compromise and even mutilate those grand goals in the Western Hemisphere." Through its recognition policy, internal security initiatives, military and economic aid programs, and, above all, destabilization campaigns in countries such as Brazil, British Guiana, and Guatemala, the administration demonstrably bolstered regimes and groups that were undemocratic, conservative, and frequently repressive. The president's oft-quoted remark about the descending order of possibilities in the post-Trujillo Dominican Republic proved to be a

reliable guide to what choices the administration would make. (There are three descending order of possibilities: a decent, democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we can't renounce the second, until we are sure that we can avoid the third).

In an way, however, the Kennedy-Johnson years were not characterized by failure in Latin America. Latin America was the most dangerous area in the world because the administration feared the expansion of Castro-communism throughout the region. The Alliance for Progress, or what Arthur Schlesinger dubbed "enlightened anti-communism," was to be the new way to address the threat. The Alliance did not achieve its goals, but neither the Kennedy nor the Johnson administration ever relented in pursuing anti-Communist policies. During the 1960s neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba expanded its influence in the region. The capture and execution of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967 proved symbolic of U.S. success in the region.

All four papers implicitly challenge the view that the Kennedy administration's commitment to waging Cold War overrode all considerations when it came to Latin America. In his paper on domestic politics and the Bay of Pigs, **Steve George** dwells on the well-known dilemmas that President Kennedy had from 20 January 1961 until 17 April, 1961, the beginning of the invasion. Kennedy had made Castro a big issue, the exile community in Miami expected action, there was a plan that was a year old, the plan came from America's most distinguished former general, Eisenhower had personally pressured Kennedy on the issue, Kennedy would have a "disposal" problem with the army training in Guatemala, etc. In short, there seemed to be no way out for Kennedy but to go ahead with the invasion, while trying to keep the U.S. hand hidden. In fact, there was a way out. JFK could have deplored the fact that the "cover" had been blown about the exile army (there were numerous newspaper reports), lamented it, and moved on. In any case, JFK did hope to overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs and was most impressed by the reports he had received about the exile army. The Bay of Pigs failed—not because of poor planning per se—but because there was a fundamental misunderstanding of the depth and strength of Castro's support. The success of the invasion was predicated on a wholesale uprising in Cuba. The Bay of Pigs was a Cuban triumph and a personal victory for Castro. Focusing only on the U.S. side of the story inevitably misleads the historian.

But that still begs the question. If there had not been the Bay of Pigs planning, would Kennedy have moved against Castro? In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Kennedy ruled at a National Security Council meeting in May 1961 that U.S. policy would continue to "aim at the downfall of Castro." Operation Mongoose followed; assassination efforts went on. In early 1962, Robert Kennedy, quoting his brother noted that "the final chapter on Cuba has not been written." To be sure, failure at the Bay of Pigs undoubtedly fueled the desire to overthrow

Castro. But the Kennedy brothers always held that Castro-communism in the Western Hemisphere threatened U.S. national security, impeded the ability of the US to act in Asia and Europe, and threatened to become a domestic political problem.

Jeff Bass takes a similar approach as George in noting the extreme pressure Kennedy felt from hawkish Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Kennedy judged some of their ideas for overthrowing Castro as absurd. But again, would Kennedy have followed a different policy toward Cuba, if he did not have to listen to George Smathers and Richard Russell? Speaking of absurd ideas, his brother twice advocated bombing Guantánamo, and then using that as a pretext for invading Cuba. In June 1963, Kennedy presided over a meeting, as “Higher Authority” in which he personally approved sabotage and terrorism in Cuba. He reviewed the program in November 1963 and gave continued approval. On 18 November 1963, in his last speech on inter-American affairs, he pronounced his Kennedy Doctrine, asserting that the United States would never allow another Communist regime in the hemisphere. In that speech, Kennedy also said that Castro was a “barrier to be removed.” Various interpreters have suggested that phrase—barrier to be removed—was a signal to Cuban conspirators that the president wanted assassination plots against Castro to proceed. Indeed, a CIA meeting took place with a potential assassin on 22 November 1963.

This is not to say that domestic politics and concerns did not motivate Kennedy’s policies toward Cuba or Latin America in general. In his stormy meeting with Prime Minister Macmillan in England June 1963, Kennedy repeatedly expressed the worry that the issues of Cuba and British Guiana would be used against him by a right-wing Republican in the 1964 campaign. But I think the evidence suggests that national security concerns overrode domestic political considerations. Kennedy believed that being an effective Cold Warrior would produce political benefits for himself and his party.

Dustin [Walcher] and **Mike [Neagle]** take a different approach in implicitly defending Kennedy’s record in Latin America. They note that in the respective cases of Argentina and Peru the administration tried and failed to prevent extraconstitutional changes of government. As such, they both conclude there were limits to U.S. power and that the United States was not omnipotent in Latin America. Fair enough. But I am not sure what serious scholar has ever made the claim that the United States could determine every outcome in Latin America. Perhaps we have to go back to some of the work by the British historian, Gordon Connell-Smith, in the 1970s to find such assertions of U.S. domination. But serious textbooks on inter-American relations, by luminaries such as Mark Gilderhus, Kyle Longley, and Alan McPherson, emphasize efforts by Latin Americans to resist U.S. power.

Let's look at the record to prove that the United States cannot always manipulate Latin Americans. The Kennedy administration "whacked" Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic; it tried but failed to "whack" Francois, "Papa Doc" Duvalier. Too bad; a lamentable failure in "whacking." In the 1960s, the CIA spent lavishly on the elections of Eduardo Frei in Chile, Forbes Burnham in Guyana, Rene Barrientos in Bolivia, and Joaquín Balaguer in the Dominican Republic. As Richard Helms of the CIA told his associates, President Johnson ordered him to ensure the election in the Dominican Republic of the man favored by the United States. To be sure, the CIA failed to prevent the election of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1970. The Kennedy administration destabilized governments in Brazil, British Guiana, and Guatemala and the Johnson administration invaded the Dominican Republic. But both administrations failed to overthrow Fidel Castro. It did, however, catch Che Guevara. Plans for democracy do not always work out. After encouraging and assisting the Brazilian military to overthrow the constitutional government of João Goulart, U.S. officials expected the Brazilian military men to turn power over to civilians in due time. They were "shocked," "shocked" when the Brazilian generals turned out to be not nice people and imposed brutal military rule. Then, the "domino theory" took hold in South America and murderous military regimes appeared everywhere. See, there are limits to U.S. power in Latin America.

Both Dustin and Michael are correct that the United States wanted constitutionalism to survive in Argentina and Peru. But I think they should assess the intensity of the effort put forth by the Kennedy administration. Again, I think the national security issues—fear of the spread of communism—were critical. Some members of the administration, like Secretary of State Dean Rusk, were not sorry to see Arturo Frondizi of Argentina go. Frondizi had repeatedly resisted U.S. pressure to break diplomatic ties with Castro. U.S. officials had continually made their unhappiness about the Cuban issue known to anti-Communist Argentine military officers. Frondizi actually complained about this meddling, which he considered dangerous, to President Kennedy in a meeting in December 1961. Relations with Cuba was the critical issue for the U.S. in Latin America in the 1960s. In the end, only Mexico resisted U.S. pressure and maintained relations with Cuba or the Soviet Union. The United States used the lesson of Frondizi's downfall to pressure civilian leaders in Ecuador to break relations with Cuba. The Kennedy administration also conducted warm relations with the Argentine military from March 1962 to June 1963.

Víctor Haya de la Torre and his *Apristas* were the type of people—anti-Communist social reformers—that the Kennedy administration wanted to see in Latin America. The administration did take, as Michael suggests, extraordinary steps in denouncing the military *golpe*. The administration took similarly strong steps to support Rómulo Betancourt and the *Adecos* in Venezuela. My question would be a counterfactual one. If the issue of communism was present would the Kennedy administration have acted in the same way. Moreover, the administration, in the

end, gave up and recognized the Peruvian military. Was the intensity of effort the same as the movement to unseat Goulart in Brazil, for example?

Finally, I take Michael's point in his cultural analysis of President Kennedy's decision to abandon the non-recognition policy. The image of being a masculine winner was important to the president. But I would be careful with this in the case of Kennedy. U.S. leaders have traditionally taken a patronizing, condescending attitude toward Latin Americans. But Kennedy liked, admired, respected his fellow Roman Catholics. Those Latin Americans who visited the Oval Office, always left impressed with the dignity and respect that they had received and the seriousness and depth of their conversations with the president. Again, I believe, that national security issues were uppermost in Kennedy's approach to Latin America.

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