



Max Paul Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations” (Historiographical), *Diplomatic History*, Volume 27, Issue 5 (November 2003): 621-636.

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Max Paul Friedman’s “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In” has two main purposes, to highlight recent work on United States-Latin American relations and in the process to critique earlier approaches to and interpretations of United States foreign policy toward Latin America. In particular, he challenges Mark Gilderhus’s claim in 1992 that “an evolving synthesis” based on New Left revisionism had emerged on United States-Latin American relations. This synthesis revealed the “not-so-hidden hand of the ‘colossus of the North’ behind much that was dark in twentieth-century Latin American history: authoritarian government, stifled economic development, systemic inequality, tragic levels of violence.” (621) Instead, the new international history, based on multinational archival research, has sought “to integrate the actions and perspectives of Latin Americans into an explication of bilateral or multilateral relations, without losing sight of the fundamental disparity of power between the North and the South.” (625) In the process, this scholarship focuses on the actions of Latin American leaders in their nations relations with the United States, allows for their agency, and challenges the central elements of the “revisionist synthesis that depicted the United States as a regional hegemon” (626).

One important impetus for this change comes from the influence of Latin American history and the incorporation of Latin American archives that restore the “neglected half of ‘U.S.-Latin American relations.’” (625) The increasing use of multi-national archives is a now well-recognized development and found throughout the study of U.S. foreign relations. In the new studies based on this research, Latin American leaders “appear as genuine partners in the relationship, acting with autonomy and pursuing their own interests to the best of their ability within an asymmetrical framework.” (627) For example, recent studies of Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua portray him as an independent leader who was able to amass his fortune and dominate his nation “in spite of U.S. policies, not because of them.” (629) Skillfully playing off factions within the United States, and maneuvering and manipulating situations for his own advantage, the Somoza that emerges from these works was no mere puppet of Washington. At times, most notably during the later years of World War II and the immediate postwar period, he successfully fended off criticisms from the United States and efforts by some State Department officials to distance Washington from his rule.

Similarly, the Dominican Republic’s long ruling dictator, Rafael Trujillo is depicted as a “self-interested leader” whose regime was “in conflict with substantial U.S. interests.” He, too, held onto power and favor in Washington by knowing how to play to the fears and aspirations of U.S. leaders, mainly through, as Eric Roorda’s *The Dictator Next Door* demonstrates, the “use of symbols designed to make U.S. officials feel a certain affinity with him.” (633) In addition,

Trujillo cultivated allies, most often through outright bribery, within both the government and private sectors. For Friedman, Roorda's study "may be a harbinger of future trends in the field: the successful blending of foreign and domestic sources and cultural and political approaches to international relations." (634) While noting that the use of power must properly remain the focus of studies of international relations, Friedman calls for a broader understanding of how power is exercised. This approach combines more traditional notions of power, such as the overtly political actions of the state, with the cultural forces; that is power as "it is contained in symbols, identities, language, and everyday practices." (634) These studies, Friedman opines, "successfully challenge the notion of U.S. policy as a *dues ex machine*, with the United States somehow responsible for all developments in bilateral relations, even when the country in question is ruled by a friendly dictator" (631).

In his first task, bringing together the new scholarship and approaches in the study of U.S.-Latin American relations, Friedman succeeds admirably. The works he discusses are significant new scholarship and Friedman has done an excellent job of synthesizing these interpretations and demonstrating their importance. The new international history has brought not only fresh documentary material to light, but allows scholars to ask different and important questions about United States relations with all areas of the world. These works demonstrate the complexity of these interactions and the agency of others in shaping and influencing Washington's policy, while also providing a different window, if you will, for viewing relations. It is hard to argue with Friedman's conclusion that "restoring Latin America to the equation in terms of both agency and archives while turning to culture for a fuller understanding of the scope of the political" (636) has produced excellent studies that add greatly to the field.

The remaining question is do these studies present a significant enough departure in our understanding of U.S. policy and relations with Latin America that they challenge the most important assumptions and points of the consensus Friedman notes? Moreover, are these works bringing forth a new synthesis? Here, the essay is less successful. To be sure, it is important to demonstrate the agency of Latin American leaders, and to take into account their objectives, goals, and role in relations with the United States. We are all learning a great deal from these works, and similar ones in other geographic areas. But as Friedman acknowledges, at least in the case of the Caribbean basin and relations with right-wing dictators that are the focus of the article, these works mainly update the revisionist synthesis by providing more details, and making it clear that "agency and independence are not the same thing" (631).

The case of Nicaragua demonstrates the false dichotomy presented in pitting the new international history against earlier studies. While it is true that Somoza was able to influence relations with Washington, and maintain its support despite criticisms, his ability to act was circumscribed by the need to retain the support of American presidents. The United States might not have obtained all it sought from Somoza, and he may have acted independently at times, but that does not mean the United States larger interests were not served. Furthermore, the agency discussed is only that of the dictators and other Latin American elites who benefited from close relations with the United States. That is, the new studies do not show that the interests of the people of Latin America were being served in ways that the earlier scholarship missed, or that the United States was forced to change its policies in the face of opposition by the "puppets."

Surely the United States had to work with local elites to achieve its goals, and that process always meant some compromise and frustration for American officials. In the end, however, Washington received what it most wanted, a friendly dictator who maintained order and stability, protected American economic interests, and actively worked to suppress radical political forces in the region. In other words, the “discovery” of agency by Somoza (or Trujillo and the other dictators) does not call for a significant change in our understanding of U.S. goals and policy toward Nicaragua. In the case of the Caribbean basin, the disparities of power were just too great. It was unlike, most notably, Europe and Japan where local elites were able to significantly challenge and at times alter American policy.

Friedman’s summary of John Coatsworth’s Central America and the United States is more compelling than the view that the new work calls into question the fundamental findings of earlier studies on Central America. Coatsworth’s conclusions, Friedman writes, “are very much in line with the revisionist consensus,” particularly that the poverty, violence, and instability of the region are due to Washington’s support of local elites, “which allowed them to be especially intransigent in defending their privileges.” (632) The new studies show us with more detail, nuance, and sophistication, how this was the case as the dominance of the United States was strengthened as much as challenged by the actions of Latin American dictators and their sycophants.

The field of United States foreign policy benefits enormously from this new international history. But the field is also large and diverse enough to continue to welcome works that examine the decision making in Washington D.C. I, too, hope that books like Eric Roorda’s indicate a trend in the field, but so they can join with other works in providing us our most rich and compelling understanding of U.S. relations with the world. The collection of essays discussed at the end of the essay, *Close Encounters of Empire*, shows particularly promising avenues for this research as scholars move beyond the dictators and elites to the impact of U.S. imperialism on the people of Latin America, and various forms of resistance practiced at the local level against Washington’s policies and U.S. companies, and the local elites who collaborate with them.

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