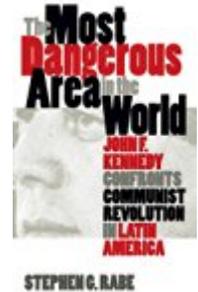


Stephen G. Rabe. *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. 257 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-4764-0.



Reviewed by Mark T. Berger

Published on H-USA (June, 1999)

Stephen Rabe has produced an impressive study of a crucial period in the history of inter-American relations. Using a range of secondary and primary sources, including recently released government material, Rabe's detailed analysis of John F. Kennedy's anti-communist crusade in Latin America follows on from his earlier volume on the Eisenhower era. In *Eisenhower in Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism*, which is still widely regarded as one of the best overall histories of U.S. policy in the Americas in the 1950s, Rabe emphasized that Eisenhower and his advisors "interpreted inter-American affairs almost solely within the context of the Soviet-American confrontation" and "willingly embraced military dictators who professed to be anti-Communist." He argued that even by its own standards the Eisenhower administration's Latin American policy was "unsuccessful." In the 1950s, said Rabe, Washington policy-makers justified their policies toward Latin America with the argument that "they would enhance freedom, the respect for human rights, and economic opportunity." However, Eisenhower and his officials spent the decade "hugging and bestowing medals on

sordid, often ruthless, tyrants," while their policies consistently "strengthened the Latin American military." [1]

The new book picks up the story where his earlier book left off; however, it appears to this reviewer to be noticeably more critical of the overweening anticommunism of the Kennedy administration than his earlier study was of the Eisenhower administration. This may flow from the fact that *Eisenhower in Latin America* was written during the 1980s, at a time when anticommunism was still a powerful current and even scholars sceptical of its simplistic formulations were not immune to its influence. The new volume, by contrast, was produced in an era when the global conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. is now treated as a relatively discrete historical era and the demise of the Soviet Union has allowed for more widespread questioning of the more optimistic assessments of its intentions and capabilities in Latin America and elsewhere during the Cold War. The more critical tone of the new volume may also be a result of the fact that, during his short presidency, John F. Kennedy promised

far more than Eisenhower ever did in relation to Latin America and therefore had more scope for failure. Certainly, Kennedy's dramatic efforts to revitalize the Cold War when he entered the White House in 1961 resulted in a number of important changes and a range of new initiatives centred on the grandiose Alliance for Progress. And, not surprisingly, Rabe devotes particular attention to this ambitious initiative.

At the outset the author asks whether the Alliance era was "unique" in inter-American history or "part of the customary U.S. search for hegemony in the Western Hemisphere?" He also seeks to explain the failure of the Alliance for Progress, the "depth" of Kennedy's "commitment to reform" and the "balance" between "his clarion call for change" and "his Cold War concerns for stability and anticommunism" (pp. 7-8). Rabe argues that Kennedy's "paramount concern" was "[f]ighting and winning the Cold War in Latin America" (p. 19). However, also driving the Alliance for Progress specifically and administration policies in the region generally, according to Rabe, was Kennedy's belief (as a former aide recalled) that "Latin America's not like Asia or Africa. We can really accomplish something there." The author emphasizes that, in this context, the planners of the Alliance failed to examine their "fundamental assumptions" or ask "hard questions" about the 'communist threat' and the regional and international role of the U.S.S.R. Unfortunately, says Rabe, it was axiomatic "that a Castro-style revolution might engulf the hemisphere," and Kennedy and his advisors never considered that Cuba might have been a special case which, because of its "unusual colonial history, close ties to the United States, and peculiar sugar-based economy, had developed a uniquely fragile set of political, social and intellectual institutions." Nor did they make a "sober assessment" of the Soviet Union's financial and military ability to "extend its power throughout the Western Hemisphere" (pp. 29-30). Elsewhere he observes that U.S. officials under Kennedy and Johnson "ultimately discounted nu-

anced analyses of insurrection in Latin America and trusted in their fears, and in the familiar certainties of policy documents such as NSC 68 (1950) that the Soviet Union orchestrated the world's troubles" (p. 139).[2]

Rabe emphasizes that while the combination of anticommunist globalism and the Cuban revolution was the proximate cause of the Alliance for Progress, it had its intellectual roots in the classical theories of modernization which rose to prominence in the 1950s and early 1960s.[3] He notes that the Alliance was shaped indirectly by the work of a range of prominent academic modernization theorists such as Kalman Silvert and John J. Johnson, as well as Lucian Pye, Gabriel A. Almond and Samuel P. Huntington. It was also shaped directly by President Kennedy's Task Force on Latin America, which was run by Adolf A. Berle (who had been Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs under Roosevelt) and included prominent modernization theorists and "action intellectuals" such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Walt Whitman Rostow, along with Seymour Martin Lipset, Cyril E. Black and Max Milikan, as well as Latin American specialists such as Lincoln Gordon and Arthur Preston Whitaker (pp. 24-26). Classic modernization theory assumed that reform and economic development would lead inexorably to political democracy and stability. As Rabe makes clear, however, this view was increasingly discredited by trends in Latin America, and in short order classic modernization theory was displaced by military modernization theory. With the support of influential policy-oriented academics (such as Johnson, Pye, Milikan and Huntington), the idea "that development and security could be achieved through a 'modernizing military' became a central feature of the Kennedy administration's approach to Latin America." For example, Pye argued that military establishments "could serve as "modernizing agents," while Milikan "suggested inviting more military officers to the United States to study the

'potential uses of the army in economic and social development'" (pp. 126-28, 129, 143, 185).

Thus, the democratic and reformist emphasis of the Alliance for Progress was increasingly sidelined in favour of a preference for authoritarianism and militarism. As Rabe observes, U.S. officials worried that the reform process would take time, and even before completing work on the plans for the Alliance the Kennedy administration embarked on a range of "extraordinary measures to contain political turmoil and win the Cold War in the Caribbean region" (pp. 32-33). For example, in the case of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and in keeping with the reformist agenda of the Alliance, the U.S. initially "attacked the type of right-wing governments that had been traditional allies of the United States during the Cold War." However, by the time of Kennedy's assassination, U.S. policy in the Dominican Republic had come full circle, and in Haiti a similar pattern prevailed. The pattern was one in which the U.S. started by attacking a "hideous dictator who tortured, robbed and murdered innocent civilians." But then U.S. policy-makers became worried that "desperate Haitians would look to extremist, Castro-like revolutionaries" and eventually Washington "resigned itself to living with a dictator" who espoused anti-communism (pp. 48, 54-55). This shift in understanding of the imperatives of the Cold War also led the Kennedy administration to "encourage" military officers in Guatemala, Brazil, and Argentina to play a greater role in the government of their countries. Rabe concludes that by bolstering groups that resisted change, such as the military, the Kennedy administration "violated its core belief that violence, extremism, and even revolution would ensue throughout the region if Latin Americans did not enjoy political and economic progress" (pp. 77-78). Thus, despite the reformist goals of the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration "dramatically changed the U.S. relationship with the Latin American military" and helped to strengthen "the role of the military in Latin American life." Kennedy and his

successors increasingly deployed military aid as an incentive to encourage soldiers to "concentrate on internal security and national development." With U.S. sponsorship, the Latin American militaries embarked on "new missions" related to "counterinsurgency," "civic action," and "public safety" (pp. 125, 147).

The Kennedy administration's involvement in British Guiana (where its "virulent anticommunism" would lead, in the author's words, to "astounding positions on the issues of colonialism and racism") is also examined in detail (p. 78). In elections held as part of step-by-step process of decolonization, Cheddi Jagan became prime minister of British Guiana in August 1961. However, the Kennedy administration had "persuaded themselves" that a Jagan government in British Guiana "imperiled Latin America and the Alliance for Progress and threatened the security of the United States" (pp. 82-83). Kennedy attempted to get the British to "drag out" the independence process. At the same time, the president sent agents to the colony to undermine Jagan's electoral campaign and stir up "racial tensions." Ultimately, says Rabe, Kennedy "spurned Cheddi Jagan, a leader who welcomed the Alliance for Progress, and embraced Forbes Burnham, an authoritarian and demagogue." Furthermore, Rabe expresses concern that Kennedy's "experience" with British Guiana led directly to his repudiation of the principle of nonintervention, which had been the "essence" of the Good Neighbor policy.

This shift was manifested in the Kennedy Doctrine outlined in Kennedy's last speech on Latin America. In this speech, which he gave in November 1963, he emphasized the need to "come to the aid of any government requesting aid to prevent a takeover aligned to the policies of foreign communism." Kennedy asserted that "[e]very resource at our command" needs to be deployed "to prevent the establishment of another Cuba in this hemisphere." While Kennedy's assassination shortly afterwards distracted attention from the

implications of this statement, this aspect of Washington's policy was driven home in early 1965, when President Johnson dispatched 20,000 U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic under the auspices of the "Johnson Doctrine." Building directly on the Kennedy Doctrine, Johnson justified the Dominican intervention with the assertion that "the American nations cannot, must not, will not permit the establishment of another Communist government in the Western Hemisphere" (pp. 97-98).

Kennedy and his advisors, says Rabe, "found the challenge of nation building in Latin America far more daunting" than they had initially envisioned. From his perspective the Alliance for Progress was "a notable policy failure of the 1960s, superseded only by the U.S. debacle in Vietnam." Kennedy and his officials soon discovered that their "optimistic outlook, historical experiences, and theories on modernization and middle-class revolutions" were no guarantee of economic success in the region (pp. 148-49). He muses that if the Kennedy administration "had soberly analyzed Latin America's problems, displayed a healthy skepticism toward their models of development, showed respect for Latin America's traditions, and had the full resources of a Marshall Plan, they perhaps would have been more successful in helping the region generate and sustain a healthy rate of economic growth." However, "even if all officials had been wiser, braver and richer, the Alliance for Progress would have been bedeviled by population, trade, and investment problems." Furthermore, Kennedy "took a timid approach toward agrarian reform," and the Alliance for Progress "could have succeeded only if it transformed socioeconomic conditions in the countryside, the locus of Latin America's poverty, underdevelopment, and population explosion" (pp. 161-62, 168). In relation to this question, Rabe notes that the story of agrarian reform "pointed to a tension between the administration's call for middle-class revolution and its search for an anti-Communist stability." Then Rabe, with apparent

approval, cites Chester Bowles, who argued retrospectively that "the president and his advisors never 'had the real courage to face up to the implications' of the principles of the Alliance for Progress" (pp. 171-72). Rabe concludes that an analysis of U.S.-Latin American relations in the Kennedy era "demonstrates" that it is necessary "to separate the president's words from his decisions and his administration's deeds." Although he "brought high ideals and noble purposes to his Latin American policy," Kennedy's "unwavering determination to wage Cold War in 'the most dangerous area in the world' led him and his administration ultimately to compromise and even mutilate those grand goals for the Western Hemisphere" (pp. 196-97, 199).[4]

This is a thorough and engaging study of a crucial period in the history of the Cold War in Latin America. My main criticisms relate to Rabe's framework and the assumptions on which it rests. His overall approach to the dynamics of U.S. policy in the Kennedy era is made clear by his comment that, despite a "special emphasis" on Latin America, the Kennedy administration's "policy can be interpreted as being firmly within the context of the history of twentieth-century inter-American relations." As scholars have long held, Washington has "pursued consistent objectives" in the Americas, seeking to both "exclude extracontinental powers" and "establish the dominant political and economic presence of the United States." While "the objectives have remained constant, presidential administrations have varied their tactics" (p. 198). Although the relative continuity of U.S. objectives is not in question, this interpretation reflects a traditional approach to diplomatic history and is grounded in a narrow focus on politics and the policy-makers themselves and their public and private statements and views. In particular, the wider political economy of the Cold War, which was the context in which Kennedy and his advisors operated, deserves far more emphasis. It is ironic that in the United States, where capitalism is celebrated with such enthusiasm

and regularity, a majority of scholars writing about U.S. foreign policy are still reluctant to draw too much attention to the capitalist imperatives shaping U.S. foreign policy. In contrast to Rabe, it can be argued that the struggle against international communism in Latin America was aimed first and foremost at protecting the capitalist character of economic activity in the region and promoting the position of U.S.-based investors and corporations and their allies. The centrepiece of U.S. policy in Latin America in the twentieth century has been an ongoing effort to protect and promote private, particularly U.S., capital generally and the "sanctity of private property" more specifically.[5]

While the protection of private property and the interests of capital are not the only thing driving U.S. expansion, they have provided the crucial context for the establishment and articulation of politico-strategic imperatives. As George Kennan, the Director of Policy Planning at the State Department and the most influential U.S. policy-maker of his day, observed in a 1948 planning document, "[w]e have 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population" and "[o]ur real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will allow us to maintain this position of disparity." [6] The economic considerations embodied by this comment were as central to (and as closely connected to) U.S. globalism in the Cold War era as the assumption that the "Soviet Union orchestrated the world's troubles."

Ultimately a tight focus on the anticommunist politics of the Kennedy administration fails to capture the wider capitalist imperatives which shaped its policies and also results in an unsatisfying explanation for the failure of the Alliance for Progress.[7] Rabe fails to address the fact that Kennedy's grand reformist project in Latin America threatened basic U.S. goals. The central, if unstated, goal of the Alliance for Progress was the protection of the property and investments of

U.S.-based corporations and the continued protection of the wider economic dominance of the United States. Many of the Alliance's proposed reforms endangered those interests. For example, the trade diversification ostensibly promoted by the Alliance could undermine the monopoly of primary agricultural products and mineral extraction enjoyed by a number of U.S.-based transnationals. Rabe notes in passing that significant land reform threatened the power of the still largely land-based ruling elites in Latin America. However, what needs to be emphasized is that it was these contradictions, rather than an unrealistic assessment of the 'communist threat,' which ensured that Kennedy's reformism was profoundly compromised from the outset and that it was soon completely displaced by his administration's ever-deepening commitment to military and police aid and counterinsurgency. From the very beginning, U.S.-based transnationals and the landed oligarchies and military establishments attempted to preserve the status quo and prevent any meaningful change. Although some of this is touched on, the main reason for the failure of the Alliance for Progress offered by Rabe appears to be that Kennedy, along with his predecessors and successors, were all prisoners of their anticommunism and were thus prevented from making a more "sober" analysis of the 'communist threat' in the hemisphere.

Although Rabe clearly rejects the optimistic assumptions of classic modernization theory which underpinned the early Alliance for Progress, the exceptionalist understanding of the U.S. role in the region--and the capitalist imperatives and profoundly imperial relationships which shaped such grand Pan American initiatives--are not really confronted.[8] While he concludes that Kennedy's policies were consistent with long-standing U.S. goals in the region, the angle of his criticism of the Alliance for Progress (and what appears to be a tone of disappointment) implies that its "grand goals" did not have to be "compromised" or "mutilated" and were in

some sense achievable. This suggests an unwillingness to let go of the idea, which continues to shape scholarship in the post-Cold War era, that the United States represents, or at least could represent, a beacon of liberty to the rest of the world and this has been, or at least could be, reflected in its foreign policy.[9] Despite these criticisms, however, I found *The Most Dangerous Area in the World* to be a genuinely engrossing read. Furthermore it represents an important study of the Alliance for Progress, something which has thus far been subjected to surprisingly little study by researchers. This is an important book and should be read by everyone interested in the Alliance for Progress and inter-American relations in the Kennedy era.

Notes

[1]. Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 174-75, 177.

[2]. For a detailed comparative study of revolution in Latin America which emphasizes the historical singularity of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions and attributes their success in considerable measure to the particularly decrepit character of the Batista and Somoza regimes, see Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3]. On the relationship between modernization theory and the Alliance for Progress, see Michael E. Latham, "Ideology, Social Science and Destiny: Modernization and the Kennedy-Era Alliance for Progress," *Diplomatic History* vol. 22. no. 2. 1998; Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and U.S. Hegemony in the Americas 1898-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

More generally see Samuel L. Baily, *The United States and the Development of South America 1945-1975* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976).

[4]. Rabe places great emphasis on the influence of anticommunism on foreign policy making. This comes close to the argument made by Tony Smith that the "essence" of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War was "anti-communism", and this was for "reasons" which "would seem to be essentially political." Tony Smith, "American Imperialism is Anti-Communism" in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jurgen Osterhammel, eds., *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986) pp. 41, 46-48. Also see Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press/Twentieth Century Fund, 1994). Meanwhile, other historians of inter-American relations, such as Cole Blasier, treat politico-strategic factors as separate from, and more important than, economic variables, and emphasize the profoundly anticommunist political and cultural context in which policy was made. See Cole Blasier, *The Hovering Giant: US Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America 1910-1985* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, revised edition, 1985; first published 1976).

[5]. Charles Bergquist, *Labor and the Course of American Democracy: U.S. History in Latin American Perspective* (London: Verso, 1996) pp. 96-98; Morris H. Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution: The United States and Cuba 1952-1986* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Morris H. Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas: State and Regime in US Policy 1969-1981* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). More generally, see Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) and Stephen Gill, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commis-*

sion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[6]. Kennan cited in William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 1.

[7]. For a useful summary of the debate about the 'failure' of the Alliance for Progress see Abraham F. Lowenthal, "'Liberal', 'Radical' and 'Bureaucratic' Perspectives on US Latin American Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Retrospect" in Julio Cotler and Richard R. Fagen, eds., *Latin America and the United States: The Changing Political Realities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

[8]. Amy Kaplan, "Left Along With America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture" in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Gilbert M. Joseph, "Close Encounters: Toward a New Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations" in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

[9]. Even the relatively conservative policy intellectual Samuel Huntington has lamented what he calls the "'benign hegemon' syndrome." In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* he illustrated this phenomenon by pointing to the assertion by Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State and longtime Clinton administration insider, that "[i]n a fashion and to an extent that is unique in the history of Great Powers, the United States defines its strength--indeed its very greatness--not in terms of its ability to achieve or maintain dominance over others, but in terms of its ability to work with others in the interests of the international community as a whole." Talbot then concludes that U.S. "foreign policy is consciously intended to advance universal values." Meanwhile, according to Lawrence H. Summers (a former Deputy Secre-

tary of the Treasury, and close advisor to both Clinton and Gore, who succeeded Robert Rubin as Secretary of the Treasury earlier this year) the United States is the "first nonimperial superpower." This is a formulation which, according to Huntington, "manages in three words to exalt American uniqueness, American virtue, and American power" and overlook the fact that in numerous parts of the world, including Latin America, the U.S. is not seen as a promoter of 'universal values,' nor is it necessarily regarded as 'nonimperial.' Talbott and Summers in Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 78. no. 2. March/April 1999 pp. 37-38, 40-41.

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Citation: Mark T. Berger. Review of Rabe, Stephen G. *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

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