In *Precarious Paths to Freedom*, Aragorn Storm Miller offers a decent examination of high-level US Cold War-oriented policy toward Venezuela in the first decade after the Cuban Revolution, as well as a useful English-language discussion of conflicts proliferating throughout the country in these years. Often lost in the focus on Latin American Cold War "hot spots" in the 1950s and 1960s, Venezuela was also drawn into regional and international issues. After the removal of military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, Rómulo Betancourt and his successors set about leading an aspiringly modern and relatively democratic state. However, right-wing dissidents and leftist guerrillas, respectively patronized by Dominican and Cuban dictators, sought to deter such plans. As Miller shows, US and Venezuelan officials cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship that rebuffed these challenges and outlasted the tumultuous decade. *Precarious Paths to Freedom* deserves to be commended for revisiting this historical episode and attempting to bring US-Venezuelan bilateral relations into the scholarly debate. While capably placing US policy toward Venezuela into a larger international context, Miller’s methodology is less successful regarding the regional and Latin American dimensions—that is, “the Latin American Cold War” aspect of the book’s title.

In his first chapter, Miller lays out a brief synopsis of US policy toward Latin America and the crises emerging in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela by the mid-to late 1950s. Immediately, he attempts to rebut the scholarly emphasis on the May 1958 protests and stoning of Vice President Richard Nixon in Caracas as pivotal in changing US policy toward the region. Supposedly, “the darker days of the US approach to Latin America, typified by Eisenhower’s decisions to intervene in Guatemala in 1954 and to present the Legion of Merit award to authoritarian anticommunists, were slowly being overcome” already (p. 30). To demonstrate this, he opens with the claim that Dr. Milton Eisenhower and Thomas Mann’s ideas in the later years of the Eisenhower administration for grant and aid programs to address Latin American poverty and inequality somehow epitomized a changing perception in US policy that would be “recapitulated” with the Alliance for Progress of the Kennedy Administration (p. 6). This argument falls apart, though, due to the absence of suitable comparisons. Relying upon a memoir and oral histories rather than perusing their files, Miller does not actually identify how US policy toward Latin America in these years or Dr. Eisenhower and Mann’s ideas on economic development differed from their early 1950s counterparts. An examination of Dr. Eisenhower’s papers at Pennsylvania State University and the Eisenhower Library and Mann’s papers at Baylor University would have allowed Miller to pull out important contrasts in Dr. Eisenhower’s 1953 and 1958 reports on Latin America that were distributed throughout the Eisenhower administration or in Mann’s understanding of Latin American poverty since his support of the 1954 Guatemalan coup. A better engagement with the literature on the Eisenhower administration’s economic policies toward Latin America would have brought nuance to Miller’s assessment regarding the goals of Dr. Eisenhower and Mann’s suggestions in the later 1950s that may prove his hypothesis.[1]

Most notably, Miller overlooks pivotal regional per-
sons, events, processes, and issues that would have helped in probing the Latin American sides of his study, a problem that emanates throughout *Precarious Paths to Freedom*. He positions Brazil’s Juscelino Kubitschek as “perhaps the first regional leader to suggest that US policy sowed the seeds of its own destruction, and to link underdevelopment with left-wing revolution” (p. 13). However, numerous Latin American leaders had criticized US policy toward the region. Never does Miller articulate how Kubitschek’s warning to Eisenhower that poverty bred communism, a message which received no response, diverged from similar arguments put forward by Costa Rica’s José Figueres or Puerto Rico’s Luis Muñoz Marín, regional leaders whose concerns were at the very least acknowledged thanks to their prominent US political contacts. Likewise, Miller does not prove that US officials’ frustrations with Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo represented some departure within an overarching policy that assisted Pérez Jiménez, Nicaragua’s Somoza dynasty, or other “authoritarian anticommunists,” a rather conspicuous absence being Fulgencio Batista considering Cuba’s important role in subsequent chapters. There is a superficial overview of Betancourt’s activities before 1958 that relies on a couple of his published works. For a study about the relationships between US and Venezuelan officials, Miller astoundingly never references the Trienio Adeco, the three years during which Betancourt and his political party Acción Democrática guided their country’s affairs. Between 1945 and 1948, these Venezuelans who would become central actors in Miller’s work learned firsthand about the rewards in cooperating with, and costs in challenging, US goals. With an abundant literature of texts and even primary source compilations in English and Spanish, Miller missed a crucial opportunity to discuss Venezuelan perspectives of the US government as Betancourt and the Punto Fijo coalition aimed to build a stable government following Pérez Jiménez’s ouster.

Chapter 2 stands out as the strongest in contributing to the scholarship on Latin America’s Cold War. The Cuban Revolution, Trujillo’s increasingly tenuous position, and Betancourt’s coming to power sparked Caribbean tensions. Castro approved the 1959 Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo expeditions of anti-Trujillo exiles and sympathizers into the Dominican Republic, anticomunist propaganda disseminated throughout the region, and the Organization of American States (OAS) became inundated with claims of intervention from all parties. Marvelously integrating a handful of recently available files from the Dominican Republic’s Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Miller reveals new details into Trujillo’s funding of dissident Venezuelan exiles against Betancourt and the Punto Fijo coalition. As the Dominican despot’s belligerence brought US and Venezuelan officials closer together, US opposition to the Cuban Revolution saw Castro and Trujillo enter into an unofficial, temporary détente, with fewer denunciations exchanged between the two. Lamentably, Miller does miss a chance to insert this superb research deeper into Latin American Cold War scholarship. “As Betancourt and Castro emerged as powerful figures in Venezuelan and Cuban politics,” he claims, “Trujillo’s rhetoric changed” to portraying the two as facilitating an invasion of Soviet and international communism (p. 34). In sidestepping the decades-long animosity between Trujillo and Betancourt that began long before 1958 or the dictator’s notorious machinations against any democratic challenge to his regime, Miller presents Trujillo’s actions as unique when, in fact, they were far from it.[3] Since the 1930s, numerous dictators presented themselves as anticomunist leaders who protected Latin America from not only Betancourt but Figueres, Muñoz Marín, Juan José Arévalo, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and any other critic. Had Miller consulted the Colección Bernardo Vega, other materials at the AGN or the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo’s Archivo or Biblioteca Pedro Mir, or the myriad Dominicanist works on this, he would have been able to highlight Caribbean interpretations of communism, anticomunism, and democracy, thereby arguing more forcefully for Venezuela’s importance in Latin America’s Cold War.

Chapter 3 onward centers upon the top-level diplomacy between US and Venezuelan officials as radical leftist insurgents supported by Castro tried sabotaging Betancourt and his successor’s governments. Building upon sources from US presidential libraries, published interviews with Venezuelan guerrillas, and the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional*, Miller weaves together a flowing narrative that moves from the insurgency within Venezuela to the diplomatic considerations between US and Venezuelan administrations. *Precarious Paths to Freedom* will have significant value for Venezuelanalysts due to Miller’s tying US policy to the insurgency’s maneuvers and providing an English-language survey of these episodes, including the sabotage of industrial facilities and kidnapping of US officials, unexamined by most Latin Americanists. Miller should be lauded for finding Venezuelan references to Vietnam, the Middle East, and other Cold War moments (p. 194). In addition, his reliance on the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Libraries’ materials allows him to emphasize Betancourt’s
anti-Castro position, as when he isolated Cuba upon finding armaments smuggled into Venezuela in November 1963. This lens into the debates between Mann, Dean Rusk, and others unquestionably succeeds in demonstrating how Cuban intervention in Venezuelan affairs alarmed US officials to action at the OAS and United Nations.

While a valiant effort for considering the international Cold War and identifying the Cuban factor, the book is much less effective in relation to Latin America’s Cold War. In contrast to Miller’s solid assessment of the top of the US policymaking establishment, there is nothing comparable regarding Venezuelan actions or views. He claims Venezuelan-based materials on these events were not available. However, Venezuelans have been using such resources on the 1950s and 1960s for the past several years, including the accessible and well-organized Archivo Rómulo Betancourt at the Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, the Archivo de la Casa Amarilla with Venezuela’s Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores files, and the Archivo Histórico de Miraflores, from Venezuela’s executive. If Miller were uncomfortable going to Venezuela, readers would understand. Yet Miller does not appear to have contacted Venezuelans or utilized scholarship on the country’s foreign relations, such as that by Gustavo Enrique Salcedo Ávila, which taps into these resources.[4] He seemingly ignores Venezuelanist scholarship on Betancourt and Venezuelan foreign policy; the Betancourt Doctrine, which was a significant factor in Venezuelan-Cuban relations; or even Steve Ellner and H. Michael Tarver’s English-language studies on the radical Left. Without the same level of detail on Venezuelan discussions that he gives to US policymaking, Miller’s examination of regional affairs is hindered.

This poor grasp on Venezuelanist scholarship extends to his constricted examination of the Cuban factor, even though intervention in Venezuela is supposed to be a centerpiece of the book. Miller uses Agustín Blanco Muñoz, Alfredo Peña, and Humberto Solani’s interviews with leftist guerrillas and Venezuelan officials’ public speeches and correspondence with US officials, but these offer a narrow glimpse into Venezuelan affairs. Without the additional context that Betancourt’s numerous memoirs and writings or even fundamental compilations such as the four volumes of La revolución democrática en Venezuela would have provided, Miller’s presentation of this leader’s worldviews and policies is extremely one-dimensional.[5] In the same manner, Miller does not tap into the radical Left’s pamphlets, publications, or writings, such as those collected in Documentos del Movimiento Revolucionario Venezolano.[6] He relies on El Nacional, claiming it had a “centrist editorial perspective while also inviting commentary from liberals and conservatives” (p. 234). Research in Latin Americanist libraries for left-wing and right-wing periodicals would have helped flesh out Venezuelans’ perceptions of Cuban affairs and intervention, widening the narrow view obtained from references to La Extra in US reports or El Nacional. Similarly, Miller would have profited from Cuban literature and sources. Various Venezuelan and Cuban newspapers, texts, and more would have reminded Miller about Betancourt’s active role in encouraging democratic governments in Latin America or relationships with Cuban exiles and regional leaders who opposed Castro’s regime. As both factors influenced the rupture between the two and are emphasized in Caribbeanist texts, Miller would have addressed a long-standing debate on Latin America’s Cold War regarding the impact of these strategic issues in the middle of this regional conflict.

This criticism of Miller’s methodology is not to fetishize new or untapped source material and Latin Americanist literature, which notable scholars in Cold War studies and Latin American history have warned against. Skilled international research would have improved Miller’s presentation of the larger ideological stakes behind the Venezuelan case. Rather than relying on New York Times or Washington Post summaries, Miller should have read actual copies of Cuba’s Revolución and full texts of Cuban officials’ speeches and writings about Venezuelan matters, available in Havana, digital research sites, or various US depositories. These would have helped Miller to sketch out how Cuban officials defined and responded to Venezuelan affairs and thus strengthened his effort to place Venezuela into Latin America’s Cold War. For example, moving beyond the handful of radicals’ interviews, US newspapers, and CIA materials to leftist publications and Cuban materials would have hit upon how the Tri-Continental Conference’s debates reverberated in Venezuela. This would have not simply improved chapter 5 but also upheld Miller’s argument for the importance of the Venezuelan case by directly serving his claim that “both foreign and domestic extremists viewed control of Venezuela as the linchpin for the control of hemispheric politics” (p. 218). These resources would have illuminated the ideological components behind Cuban, Venezuelan, and quite possibly Soviet policies in the Caribbean Basin, helping Miller’s attempt to engage with Odd Arne Westad, Hal Brands, Gilbert Joseph, and Greg Grandin.

The book’s narrow scope of research also ties back
into a key question underpinning Precarious Paths to Freedom’s thesis. Throughout, Miller refers to US officials’ support of Venezuelan “democratic moderation” against “extreme right-wing or left-wing ideologies” as deciding factors in building a Washington-Caracas partnership, yet he never defines “moderate” (pp. 62-63). Consequently, it is left to the reader to guess what US officials interpreted as “moderate” in relation to “anti-communism,” “liberalism,” “nationalism,” and a host of other ideals that historians of US-Latin American relations have assessed. From Charles Ameringer to Patrick Iber, scholars have placed Betancourt into a larger democratic Left that nurtured important relationships with anticommunist liberals in the Western Hemisphere, such as the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom (IADF). Oregon representative Charles Porter, Adolf Berle, Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and others who spoke publicly on the disappearance of Jesús de Galínández and championed Betancourt to Eisenhower and Kennedy were prominent allies and members of the IADF, shaping Venezuela’s “exceptional” place in US policymaking (p. x). Interrogating this definition would have taken Miller into a more thorough investigation of Record Groups 59 and 84 at the National Archives in College Park as well as the collections of Frances Grant and Robert Alexander at Rutgers University, two of Betancourt’s invaluable colleagues.[7] Not only would their correspondence with the Venezuelan leader have helped compensate for the relative absence of Venezuelan sources. They and fellow opponents of anticommunist dictators and military regimes networked constantly with regional and transnational allies who had the ear of influential US officials and defended one another against radical right-wing and left-wing assaults, almost a near-perfect mirror to what Miller reconstructs for Venezuela. AkintothosepointedoutinworksonUS-Costa Rican and US-Argentine relations by Kyle Longley and William Michael Schmidli, alliances between Betancourt, Grant, Alexander, Figueres, Muñoz Marín, labor leader Serafino Romualdi, and others legitimized their positions as democratic reformers and staunch anticommunists. This influence was crucial in winning alliances in the State Department and the CIA, a neglected dimension that would have helped explain this “exceptional” Venezuelan story as it relates to “the Latin American Cold War.”

Notes


[7]. Miller oddly only mentions a few reports from the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs and Record Group 306 from the United States Information Agency.

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