In a 2012 essay on US president Lyndon Johnson’s Latin American foreign policy, historian Alan McPherson noted the lack of a full-length monograph on the topic. This is true no more, thanks to Thomas Tunstall Allcock. Thomas C. Mann focuses on both Johnson and Mann, who served first as Johnson’s chief Latin American adviser in the State Department, and then as undersecretary of state for economic affairs. Tunstall Allcock succeeds at synthesizing existing literature on the Johnson/Mann years with new findings gleaned from extensive primary source research. In contrast to McPherson’s contention that Johnson was a transitional president on Latin American policy between President John Kennedy’s sunny optimism and emphasis on development and Richard Nixon’s more realistic, cynical approach, Tunstall Allcock argues that Johnson and Mann continued Kennedy’s policies, infusing them with a mix of ideas from the New Deal and Good Neighbor Policy, under which they came of age during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration.[1]

Often directly addressing critics of Mann, Tunstall Alcock paints him as a staunch anticommunist concerned with maintaining US interests who “also favored sustainable aid programs and regional integration initiatives” (p. 3). This view dovetailed with Johnson’s, for whom Latin America held a lifelong interest. Though he contends Johnson’s record in the region is “mixed” (p. 4), Tunstall Alcock eschews the idea that the Johnson/Mann years were regressive and ineffective. Kennedy partisans who saw Johnson as an impostor president claimed Johnson and Mann abandoned Kennedy’s policies, particularly his Latin American-oriented Alliance for Progress. Tunstall Alcock shows, however, that the Johnson administration “wedded New Deal ideals, aspects of modernization thinking, and traditional summit diplomacy to propose a new direction for hemispheric affairs” (p. 7) while still maintaining the Alliance.

Tunstall Alcock provides a brief biography of Mann that expertly displays his ideological approach and how it not only lined up with Johnson’s, but differed little from Kennedy’s. The author shows how Mann’s pre-Johnson career combined constructive achievements with an overriding commitment to US hemispheric security that carried over into his work with Johnson. Mann grew up learning Spanish and practicing law, credentials that qualified him for many years of Latin American duty during his Foreign Service career. Starting as an adviser to the Uruguayan government during World War II, Mann tried to hew to the Good Neighbor policy of nonintervention as often as possible, while aiding Latin American economic development. In the late 1950s his conviction grew that more should be done to diversify regional economies to avoid either communist revolution or US intervention. It might seem natural that he would mold Kennedy’s Alliance, but Mann was seen as a Dwight Eisenhower-era holdover and was thus instead dispatched to Mexico, where he was ambassador until Kennedy’s assassination.

Johnson inherited an Alliance that Tunstall Alcock argues was already teetering due to bureaucratic squabbles and myopia. While nominally set up as a multilateral development fund for Latin America, from an early date it was clear that the Alliance was not a multilat-
eral institution, as its funding was controlled by an impatient Congress, which regularly slashed Kennedy’s foreign aid budget. Influential adviser Walt Rostow’s one-size-fits-all modernization theory also hampered the Alliance, influencing policymakers preconditioned to view Latin America as a homogeneous region. Already by Kennedy’s death a new push for private investment in Latin America was underway, along with a shift away from a preference toward democratic governments to more support for anticommunist dictatorships. That did not protect Johnson and Mann from the wrath of critics who felt the new president did not live up to the Alliance’s promise. Press coverage of their Latin American policy hit an early nadir with the March 18, 1964, “Mann Doctrine” speech, reported with the headline “U.S. May Abandon Efforts to Deter Latin Dictators” (p. 82). Although the Kennedy administration had recognized Guatemala’s military dictatorship and was providing $1 billion annually to Latin American militaries in counterinsurgency funds used for internal repression (p. 87), the Mann Doctrine made it seem as though Johnson’s team had regressed in the region.

At the same time, the administration badly handled rioting in the Panama Canal Zone and a military coup in Brazil. In Panama, although Tunstall Allcock contends that “the skill and flexibility with which Johnson and Mann would steer the crisis to a satisfactory conclusion would be impressive” (p. 91), the United States was committed to security above all else. Reports that Johnson was ready to invade Panama if its government collapsed amid the rioting, combined with press leaks of contradictory early reports on the progress of talks between the US and Panamanian governments, suggested that Johnson and Mann did not have a clear strategy. In Brazil, Johnson welcomed General Humberto Castelo Branco when he was installed as president, believing military rule would be temporary. Short-term economic prosperity—fueled in part by Alliance aid—followed under a US-friendly regime. But Branco installed a repressive military dictatorship, confirming critics’ fears that dictatorships were acceptable to the Johnson administration. Tunstall Allcock counters that the coup was largely driven by domestic Brazilian factors. To the extent that the United States played a role, Kennedy’s CIA funded Brazilian state governors who opposed former president João Goulart. But he also notes that because Johnson hastily expressed public support for Branco, he limited US ability to restrain the military in the future, while providing “those looking for evidence that US support for democracy in the hemisphere was dead and buried ... with a perfect example” (p. 115).

The 1965 US intervention in the Dominican Republic is oft-examined by historians of Johnson’s Latin American policy, but Tunstall Alcock adds a useful analysis. Johnson intervened in the civil war between military leaders and rebel supporters of the ousted president Juan Bosch because “domestic pressures and global credibility outweighed the importance of continuing to rebuild his administration’s reputation in Latin America” (p. 148). Mann contended the intervention was “self-defense” (p. 150), arguing that subversion by nonstate actors, even if it appeared to be in the name of a domestic revolution, justified US intervention. What was really nothing more than a civil war “was quickly subsumed into dominant Cold War paradigms” built on shaky justifications (p. 152). Tunstall Alcock adds a discussion of Mann’s visit to Santo Domingo to urge the warring sides to negotiate, arguing that he rejected a compromise plan hatched there by national security adviser McGeorge Bundy not because he favored military rule—as critics would later claim—but because he thought it was a bad plan that would lead to another coup or indefinite US occupation. He did himself no favors, however, in testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair J. William Fulbright, by taking a hard-line anticommunist tack. Fulbright accused the Johnson administration of lying and overreacting, and thus it was amid the Dominican crisis that the credibility gap opened which consumed the Johnson presidency. Even the triumph of Joaquín Balaguer over Bosch in fresh elections in 1966 involved deceit, as Johnson and Mann funneled CIA support to Balaguer. The author urges the reader to see Johnson as more than just an imperialist, that the president and Mann tried to hew a middle way between communism and a return to military rule. In the end, though, the Cold War security doctrine came first, and Tunstall Alcock rightly concludes that the Dominican crisis was disastrous for all parties.

If Tunstall Alcock’s focus on Mann is one of this book’s unique contributions to the historiography of Johnson in Latin America, the other is his analysis of Johnson’s post-Dominican inter-American policy: from 1965 to 1968, he contends Johnson was more engaged in Latin America than is commonly believed. At a conference in Rio de Janeiro in November 1965, Secretary of State Dean Rusk advocated for making some Alliance programs permanent. In 1967, Johnson—with behind-the-scenes support from the now-retired Mann—tried to make another big splash with a conference at Punta del Este, Uruguay. There Johnson pushed for multinational development projects and a hemispheric common mar-
arket, and held bilateral meetings with Latin American leaders. In 1968, the United States achieved a coffee-price stabilization agreement Mann had long hoped for, and in July the president visited Central American leaders in El Salvador. These heads of state worried, though, that the US commitment to the Alliance was tenuous, and they were correct, as Congress slashed Johnson’s final Alliance aid request in half. Even so, Tunstall Allcock emphasizes that Johnson’s efforts “reflect a genuine, if flawed, attempt by a beleaguered administration to breathe some life back into” the Alliance (p. 203).

A continued emphasis on security over development stunted the Alliance in the Johnson administration’s waning years. Tunstall Allcock believes the United States invited the 1966 military coup against Argentine president Arturo Illia through its policy of orienting Latin American militaries away from external defense and toward rooting out internal subversion. When the Peruvian military deposed President Fernando Belaúnde Terry, Johnson suspended diplomatic relations only temporarily. When Omar Torrijos seized power in Panama, Mann advised Johnson to extend recognition after a brief delay, not wanting to jeopardize the Panama Canal renegotiations he had painstakingly started in 1964. In the end, for Johnson, “Latin America had proved another frustrating foreign policy challenge” (p. 212), representing “the last significant effort of an era characterized by the belief that the United States could further its own interests by encouraging Latin American modernization and economic development through various forms of aid and assistance” (p. 214). As his successor, Richard Nixon, stated bluntly: “Latin America doesn’t matter” (p. 214).

Thomas C. Mann is an enjoyable and informative read. In just 220 pages—many adorned with excellent illustrations—Tunstall Allcock provides broad and deep coverage, putting his own spin on well-worn historiographical turf, while highlighting Johnson and Mann’s hemisphere-wide strategy. Although Tunstall Allcock is sympathetic to his subjects, he is hardly a glibly revisionist. The argument is carefully crafted and often repeated, emphasizing that while Johnson and Mann were more committed to the Alliance than their critics believed, they should still be taken to task for their shortcomings. Tunstall Allcock also does well to acknowledge other Latin American historians as his Beltway-centered work often draws on their multi-archival scholarship. The book also points toward exciting new directions in the literature of Johnson and Latin America. For instance, Tunstall Allcock analyzes Mann’s professional background and Latin American policy, but does not offer a comprehensive biography. In an era in which most prominent State Department employees are political appointees, a work highlighting a career Foreign Service officer would be welcome. More also needs to be written on the Johnson administration’s Latin American interventions beyond Panama, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. The Johnson team’s failure to prevent a military coup in Argentina, in particular, bears closer inspection, as it triggered economic instability, civil war, and brutal military rule that vexed Americans and Argentines for nearly two decades. Dustin Walcher’s forthcoming manuscript will hopefully close this gap, but as Tunstall Alcock’s all-too-brief discussions of Bolivia and Peru demonstrate, others remain.[2]

In all, Tunstall Allcock has crafted an excellent monograph that should be required reading for Johnson and foreign relations scholars. It is also timely, as President Donald Trump becomes further embroiled in Latin America. His support for Venezuela’s Juan Guaidó, on the one hand, harkens to earlier visions Washington once held for hemispheric uplift. On the other hand, Trump’s divisive anti-immigration rhetoric, mainly projected toward Mexico and Central America, reminds us of the legacy of Cold War-era presidential administrations that US security should matter above all else. Even with all the inter-American changes since the end of the Cold War, that doctrine—whether named for Mann, Johnson, or even Trump—has remained.

Notes


Chris Foss is an adjunct history professor at the University of Portland and Tokyo International University of America. Foss received his PhD in US foreign relations history from the University of Colorado in 2016. His book manuscript, Facing the World: National Security and International Trade in the Pacific Northwest since World War II, will be published by Oregon State University Press in spring 2020. Foss has written for Oregon Historical
Quarterly, Pacific Northwest Quarterly, Passport, The History Teacher, and Oregon Encyclopedia. Foss is researching a manuscript on Edith Green, who represented Oregon’s Third Congressional District from 1955 to 1974.

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