In his new monograph, Andrew J. Kirkendall traces the evolution and persistence of a strain of US political thought that for all its failures and near misses was remarkably resilient, that of the Cold War “liberal Democrats.” Hemispheric Alliances is a very good book yet—through no fault of the author—a frustrating one. Elegantly written and deeply researched, it is a valuable contribution to the study both of US-Latin American relations and of domestic US policy struggles. Yet I wonder whether Latin Americanists will sigh on many occasions; time and again, the centrist protagonists wring their hands, rhetorically aching for the region and its people while concurrently waving the sword of anti-communism in a manner that served to underpin conservative Cold Warriors in both the US and Latin America. As the reader moves across the decades, Kirkendall concretizes a strand of US politics that holds a lofty and often well-connected position yet appears sometimes rather hollow and contradictory.

The cast of characters is compelling, with several familiar faces—not least the Kennedys, Jimmy Carter, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.—alongside others who deserve this contextualized focus, such as Frank Church and Frances Grant; Grant in particular emerges as a fascinating figure. It is certainly true that Kirkendall’s subjects desired a new approach for Latin America. They were proactive and aware of the importance of seeming on the front foot; containment, they felt, was an inertial and regressive policy. This led, though, to a succession of failed initiatives that could perhaps be called “the long Alliance for Progress.” While the “official” alliance was in place (in some form) from 1961 to 1973, it had some antecedents and many successors. The set of reform-democracy-trade policies ebbed and flowed but never became normalized; it was met with indifference by Lyndon B. Johnson and fairly blunt hostility by Richard Nixon. When the alliance’s permanent committee was dissolved in 1973, the political landscape had changed dramatically, particularly in South America where democracy had been knocked to the ground by a series of coups, and
even vaguely egalitarian impulses were derided as communism, an “exotic doctrine.”

In the early period, Cold War liberals had some power but were naive. Despite providing a steady supply of training and matériel, “the Kennedy administration seemed genuinely surprised at times when they could not prevent the establishment of military governments,” Kirkendall concludes (p. 254). On a lighter note, chapter 2 has an amusing account of Schlesinger’s efforts “to convince Latin American intellectuals” that their support for Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution was misplaced. Unsurprisingly, the almost sixty thousand copies of the White Paper sent to Latin America landed amid tumbleweeds. Kirkendall kindly notes that “Schlesinger’s paper could hardly have the kind of immediate effect that many impatient Cold Warriors ... wanted” before setting out the spectacularly counterproductive effects of their preferred kind of operation, the failed Bay of Pigs invasion (p. 50)

Kirkendall argues persuasively that both the Carter and Reagan periods have distinct (relative) coherences. Under Carter, a form of liberalism returned to center stage—even if Schlesinger did not think so—after Nixon’s wholesale embrace of right-wing dictators. Though Carter did not significantly shift the window of “acceptable” politics leftward in the Latin American context, he did make specific interventions on democracy and human rights, which peeved the dictators. Policy outcomes, though, were vague. The Panama Canal treaty was a diplomatic success but unpopular domestically; the administration’s approach to the Sandinistas was ham-fisted at best; and Carter “ultimately maintained the status quo of abnormal and contentious relations with Cuba” (p. 228).

The problem for liberal Democrats was that, throughout the Cold War and beyond, they could not—indeed did not really wish to—cut the cord that linked development and security. The Alliance for Progress, in this sense, was doomed to fail. As Stephen G. Rabe has recently demonstrated, under that initiative “more US technicians worked on police projects than on health and sanitation programs.”[1] Kirkendall’s research is exemplary, and he shows that at times there were detailed and serious debates over the desired emphases and aims of the project. Nonetheless, it failed, and was publicly criticized by prominent Latin American politicians from across the ideological spectrum. Similarly, the shift in emphasis toward human rights under Carter—and decades later toward counter-narcotics and anti-corruption—was not accompanied by a serious critique of Latin American elites, nor a meaningful engagement with social justice.

While reading Hemispheric Alliances I could not help but think about Samuel Moyn’s new book, Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times (2023), and particularly the fit of pique it has evinced from the likes of Jonathan Chait. Chait recently harrumphed that Cold War liberals “fought for civil rights, a larger welfare state, and a more egalitarian economy while accepting capitalism and demanding adherence to liberal democracy.”[2] Well some of them did, a bit, sometimes. But the evidence presented in Kirkendall’s book largely supports Moyn’s thesis that liberalism became a particularly self-destructive and hypocritical creed during the Cold War. Robert Frost’s aphorism “A liberal is a man too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel” seems most apt here; for fifty years or more, Cold War liberals (and they still exist, in droves) made grand pronouncements on what Latin America needed, and what was preventing the region from achieving those imagined goals. Ultimately, though, they conceded the argument on militarism, repression, and censorship in the service of a fervent and unwavering anti-communism. The rather extreme narrative arc of Jeane Kirkpatrick is particularly relevant here, though in truth very few US liberals were able to approach specific local conflicts with fresh and critical eyes. While it took the end of the (commonly periodized) Cold War to usher in the bipartisanship under which
foreign policy differences were so often paper thin, Kirkendall's book shows signs of narrowing parameters from the 1950s onward.

Notes


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