

Jul 4 2011

REVIEW: "The shadows of the Cold War over Latin America: the US reaction to Fidel Castro's Nationalism, 1956-1959"

Chloe Pieters

Bevan Sewell

For scholars of US policies in the Cold War, the question of where to situate Latin America in any overarching narrative is a complex one. Neither wholly unimportant nor at the forefront of overt Cold War concerns, the region often existed in a state of flux – caught somewhere between the wider constructs of the Cold War and, equally important, a wider pattern of the region's constituent nations seeking to forge their own paths through the maelstrom of the second half of the twentieth century. At times, the Cold War seemed to be at the fore in the Americas. At other times, though, the presence of east-west tensions was much less manifest. Some scholars, in fact, have even gone as far as to question whether or not the Cold War ever really came to the region. Contextualising and determining the reasons behind US policy, then, has remained difficult with respect to Latin America, especially in the period between 1945 and 1962. Attempts to explain the US approach towards the region, nevertheless, have tended to focus on three explanatory frameworks: first, the imposition of dominant Cold War considerations onto the region by myopic US officials; second, the overwhelming desire of the US to secure its hegemonic position in the area that has its roots in the much longer history of inter-American relations; and third, the impact that the role and actions of the Latin American nations themselves had on the course of intra-hemispheric relations.

Each has their merits, and each – equally – has their flaws. Perhaps the most acute weakness in all three approaches is the desire to construct a narrative that can encompass all events and occurrences in the region. Doing this may fit the scholar's desire to put forth a neat understanding of US policy, but it also forcibly subsumes all other incongruities within it. Thus, it was the Eisenhower administration's inability to differentiate between nationalism and communism that drove their approach during their eight years in office and that explains their policies in Latin America. Or, to posit the opposite end of the historiographical spectrum, it was the overwhelming fear of rampant economic nationalism in the region – which would reject the US model and ultimately lead to potential exploitation by communist or anti-American forces – that compelled US decision making. Or, finally, it was a combination of US myopia and the agency of the Latin Americans that led to this era of tragic policy and devastating outcomes. As studies of the Cold War become ever-more detailed, though, the difficulty of applying one-size-fits all models of causality to US policy becomes increasingly apparent. With respect to Latin America and the 1950s, this has typically been driven by attempts to define an approach that can explain the actions of the US towards Guatemala and Cuba. Herein lies significant problems, which I will outline later.

Oddly, given the comprehensive nature of these models, little attention has been paid in existing studies to the influence that broader aspects of the Cold War have had upon US policy. Linkages are assumed, yet rarely examined in anything like forensic detail. In the article under examination here, Vanni Pettina suggests that this is a significant shortcoming. The over-emphasis on local factors in explaining Eisenhower's policy towards Fidel Castro's Cuban uprising after 1956, he contends, has ignored the impact that the rapid pace of post-World War Two decolonisation and the simultaneous effort by the leaders of the Soviet Union to court the world's developing nations, had on US perceptions of nationalist movements in the Western Hemisphere. Local factors, it is suggested, can only tell part of the story. 'American policy toward the Cuban insurrection,' was part of a 'global strategy aimed at containing the convergence between radical nationalism and communism in the Third World'.

Such an approach is intriguing, and it is refreshing to see an article attempting to suggest a new way of considering Eisenhower's approach towards Latin America. Equally pleasing is the author's focus on the way that the Eisenhower administration reacted to changes in Soviet policy after 1953, when Stalin's death and the emergence of a new leadership in the Kremlin saw Moscow implement a much more sustained attempt to further its position in the Third World. The impact that this had on US policy has, for too long, remained severely under-examined; the attempt here to view this as provoking a substantive shift in US perceptions of Third World nationalism is thus a welcome one. For US policymakers, the article suggests, there seemed to be a threatening 'convergence' between 'nationalism and Soviet foreign policy' that posed a 'frightful threat' to US security. Here, the author is on solid ground – noting the concern that US officials of both parties felt at this change in Soviet policy and, moreover, their sense that it was difficult to respond to due to the fact that Moscow was not playing by the same rules as them.

There are, nevertheless, a couple of doubts with respect to the article's main argument that occur to this reader – first, with respect to how US officials perceived, and then responded to, the Soviet challenge, and second, with regard to the impact that this had in Latin America. At issue here is not whether this is a worthwhile avenue of investigation – it seems clear to me that it undoubtedly is – but whether the article does enough to substantiate its claims regarding the importance of this global

perspective in the Western Hemisphere. In terms of a US response to Soviet moves and with respect to Eisenhower's Latin American policy the case is not ultimately persuasive; in terms of US views of Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba, however, the story is more intriguing and opens up several new possible angles of examination.

To begin with the Eisenhower administration's response to changes in Soviet policy – which at root is really the core issue that the article is dealing with in terms of its broader argument – there is a sense here that the author overstates the notion of a global US reaction that then informs Washington's appraisals of nationalism in Latin America. To be sure, the Soviet Economic Offensive (as it became known) did provide a substantial challenge to the administration's position in the developing world. Furthermore, as the article quotes Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson as recognising in a statement to Eisenhower's National Security Council (NSC), the US 'seemed to have no equivalent to match these Soviet techniques'. Yet there is a need here to recognise a difference between how the US feared that this made them look in terms of credibility and how they appraised it as a challenge to their own developmental model. The Soviet move into the Third World posed a threat to US interests because, as the author notes, its model of rapid and centralised industrialization might prove attractive to newly emerging nations. Still the argument here, which suggests that the US was unable to respond as, until the rise of Walt Rostow's 'proposal for a non-communist road to modernisation, Washington had no clear model to sell', is something of an overstatement. To the contrary, the Eisenhower administration's response to the Soviet move was to restate their fundamental belief in their own path toward development, as this was believed to be the only way that future Soviet success in such areas could be forestalled. John Foster Dulles, for instance, was deeply concerned about the Soviet moves in the Third World and agreed with the notion, made by Defense Secretary Wilson among others, that the US would have to counter this in some way, shape or form. In doing so, however, this should not see the US abandon its prevailing developmental principles. 'We cannot let ourselves be placed in a position where we can be "busted" by being obliged to meet and cap every Soviet offer of assistance all over the world,' Dulles told the NSC. 'Being obliged to equal or exceed each Soviet popularity bid would be hopeless for the United States' (i). The answer, as Eisenhower later informed Dulles, lay in long-term planning, which would 'give every nation a stake in cooperation with the United States' (ii). The danger posed to the US, a Policy Planning Report in 1956 further suggested, was 'less of "losing" countries now than of finding the less developed countries in the control of the USSR a decade or so hence.' Accordingly, the study recommended that, in response to the Soviet Economic Offensive, 'we should respond...by the effective application and improvement of our own policies toward the less developed areas rather than by efforts directly to counter Soviet actions' (iii).

Responses such as these challenge Pettina's argument that the Soviet move initiated a sea-change in the way US officials acted towards the developing world. That is not to say that the argument is without merit; rather, it is to suggest that it would have benefited from being more nuanced. There appears throughout the article to be a dislocation between what the CIA and some mid-level US officials are saying on the one hand, and what the Eisenhower administration is doing in policy terms on the other. Concerns about the attractiveness of the Soviet system to Third World nations were undoubtedly prevalent, as the author shows, among US intelligence analysts. It is less clear from the evidence presented here that this was a viewpoint shared by Eisenhower, Dulles and their key advisors. I agree that there probably is a correlation at this point between US fears of Soviet actions, the pace of decolonisation, and growing hostility within Washington toward nationalist movements. Yet I am less persuaded that this took the form of a global response, and that nationalism in all areas of the world was viewed in the same reductive way.

With respect to Latin America, the pattern outlined above – of US concerns manifesting themselves less in a dramatic shift in policy and more in a strong restatement of pre-existing developmental ideals – holds true. Indeed, it is arguably much more prominent in Latin America due to the unique position that the region has in the Cold War. Global concerns about Soviet policies notwithstanding, US officials rarely felt that the Soviet Union – or international communism – was an imminent threat in the Western Hemisphere. Between 1953 and 1961, the tone of US appraisals did change. Some, such as those Pettina charts from the CIA, did adopt more alarmist perspectives. Others, charted in internal policy discussions among leading US officials, also used similarly strident language. But the core constructs of the administration's approach did not alter significantly. The same principles outlined in 1953, in NSC 144/1, were evident in 1959, in NSC 5902/1. Communism and the pernicious Soviet influence were routinely referenced as potential problems, yet they did not form the bedrock of US policy (iv).

This can be seen in the reaction to the visit of Richard Nixon in the region in the spring of 1958. After being stoned, spat upon and generally assaulted in Caracas, Venezuela, the traumatic events of the tour compelled US officials to consider afresh where they were going wrong in Latin America. In doing so, there were some customary references to Communist agitation of deep-seated nationalist antagonisms, as US officials reverted to reflexively blaming Moscow and their like for any foreign policy problems. Before long, however, the view had changed: discontented nationalist movements had caused the protests, primarily motivated by their deep annoyance at Latin America's continued underdevelopment. A key showdown came after both Nixon and Foster Dulles had argued that Communism lay behind the anti-US protests at a Cabinet Meeting on May 16, 1958. 'The Soviet Union,' Foster Dulles argued, 'had cleverly infiltrated mass political movements in Latin America.' The CIA, however, disagreed. Its head, Foster's brother Allen, disputed these claims; his agency, he replied, 'could find no evidence that Moscow had orchestrated the Nixon incidents'. Communists may have played a role, he suggested, but it was too simplistic to cite these events as having been orchestrated by the Soviets or even local communist groups. Of ninety-nine arrests after the protests, Allen Dulles informed his brother soon afterwards, only twelve had links to communist groups (vi).

This narrative complicates Pettina's argument outlined in the CIA report of October 1958, which established that 'socialism', as a model of modernisation, had a deep affinity with Third World nationalism. In Latin America, it is argued, anti-US sentiments had become almost anti-colonial as local movements blamed the US for their continued underdevelopment. As he notes: 'From the CIA point of view, the problem was that the "socialist" leaning of many nationalist movements in Latin America offered Moscow an unmatched opportunity to extend its influence in the region' (7). Again, there are several examples that bear this out; but there are also several examples that challenge it. Furthermore, the links between CIA and other intelligence assessments and what the US actually did are not so clear cut as to be conclusive. Allen Dulles, as noted above, was often a voice of moderation – or pragmatism – in US debates over Latin America.

It is here that the attempt to view growing opposition to Fidel Castro's nationalist movement in Cuba as part of a much wider regional and global trend starts to feel forced. Nationalism posed significant problems for the US in Latin America – and, in some cases, would be viewed as part of a broader Communist conspiracy – but the Eisenhower administration did not hold that this was illustrative of a coherent Soviet move into the region or that it automatically meant that all Latin American nationalism should be opposed. How to deal with, and ameliorate, Latin American nationalism had been an issue on the administration's radar since 1953, when it was cited in an early NSC meeting as a key problem in the region and as worrisome as neutralism and increasing Communist influence (vii). Yet, at the same time, US officials recognised that nationalism in the region was not something that could be defeated. It could be challenged, especially in its most extreme variants such as in Guatemala; but outright aggression toward it was likely to be counter-productive. At an NSC meeting shortly after the Nixon trip, Eisenhower himself asked:

We have all often heard the generalization that the only force in the modern world capable of effectively combating communism is nationalism. Why then don't we go to our Latin American neighbors and preach ultra-nationalism to them, insisting that the goals of their nationalism can only be realized in conjunction with us...In short we ought to exploit the ultra-national feelings in the neighboring republics along the line of the slogan that if you can't beat them, join them (viii).

Clearly, as they did in Guatemala and would in Cuba, the Eisenhower administration stridently opposed nationalist movements it felt posed a danger to its interests. This was not a uniform response, though, and the notion of this being determined by 'the new Global Cold War era' feels stretched. It is exemplified by the different treatments in evidence in Guatemala and Bolivia, which are skimmed over too quickly here. For scholars of Eisenhower's Latin American policy, explaining the administration's different reactions in these two countries is a complicated matter. Here, Bolivia might have been the exception that helped to prove Pettina's argument. A more detailed treatment, therefore, may well have been enormously beneficial.

Notwithstanding the critique outlined above with regard to how US officials responded to the Soviet Economic Offensive and viewed Latin American nationalism, the article does succeed in making some telling points about how the US viewed Fidel Castro's revolutionary movement in Cuba from 1956 onwards. Ironically, it is the focus on these local developments that prove most compelling and which suggest intriguing avenues of further enquiry. US views of Castro, Pettina suggests, demonstrate how broader Cold War considerations could shape American perceptions of local actors. Unable to get a clear sense of what, precisely, Castro stood for, US analysts instead 'focused on the ideological implication of Castro's discourse' and his calls for radical change. That Castro's position began to be viewed as nationalistic, socialistic and therefore problematic, by US analysts seems clear enough. Their relationship to broader global trends, however, seems to rest on the similarity of the semantics used by the CIA to describe nationalist movements elsewhere in the developing world. As such, the purported resemblance between global trends and US opinions of what was happening in Cuba remains underdeveloped. Even so, the author does a good job of identifying how CIA observers and State Department officials began to chart the evolution of Castro's position and how, after 1957, this came to be seen as a threat of potential Cold War concerns as the relationship between the Cuban Communist Party and Castro's movement seemed to grow closer. I would agree with the author here that US officials were 'too quick to accept Castro as a lost cause'.

The argument could, nevertheless, have been tighter had the author gone on to look at what happened after Castro came to power in more detail. The argument, as outlined here, suggests that it was the 'Global Cold War' that facilitated this animosity by US officials towards Castro. Moreover, it tentatively raises the counterfactual proposition that, were it not for the global extent of this Cold War sensibility, some form of accommodation between the US and Castro might have been possible. In taking this approach, Pettina overlooks the fact that, irrespective of the broader context, some form of accommodation was possible. US policy after Castro's rise to power was neither febrile nor excessively hostile; there were undoubted tensions in evidence, and the relationship never appeared likely to be harmonious, but there was certainly scope for cooperation. The crucial point is that a number of factors – ranging from US hegemonic ambitions in the hemisphere, evolving Cold War concerns, and Castro's actions in the months after he took power – all contributed to the collapse in US-Cuban comity in the period after Castro's movement took Havana.^{ix} Hence, the inevitability of events suggested by the Global Cold War hypothesis is not wholly born out by the way US-Cuban relations developed after January 1959.

There is also – and finally – a broader point to consider here, which applies to this article and builds upon the point that started this review. That is, where Latin America fits in our understanding of the Cold War. Oftentimes, scholars have sought to develop models that can explain what happened in Guatemala and Cuba – beginning from a starting point of viewing them as being typical of US policy and then constructing an all-encompassing argument based around them. Increasingly, however, I wonder whether this is the wrong way round; that Guatemala and Cuba were not in fact typical, and that in attempting to make them so we are distorting the way we understand inter-American relations in the 1950s. The article here seems to me a prime example of this. I'd agree with Pettina that, at least some extent, Cold War considerations and the evolving nature of the US struggle with the Soviet Union coloured their appraisals of Castro's movement. Less clear-cut is the notion that this was part of a uniform response to the Soviet Economic Offensive and decolonisation, which influenced policy toward all areas of the world. An examination of Eisenhower's policies in Latin America does not support such an argument, at least not in the reductive sense that it was simply the Cold War driving US actions. On the other hand, an examination of what happened in Guatemala and Cuba would offer greater support for such an approach. In fact, the argument that when it came to radical nationalist movements in the Third World – whether they be in Guatemala, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, or Algeria – the US reflexively saw Cold War threats has an awful lot to support it. Rather than suggesting that this was part of a coherent global response, then, there seems to be a lot of scope for delineating between how the US viewed radical nationalist movements and how they viewed the Third World more broadly. It is in this wider, and arguably more complex, undertaking that this article points the way for future researchers to begin to delve more deeply into the nature of US policy towards Third World nationalism.

[i\) Memorandum of Discussion at the 267th Meeting of the National Security Council, Camp David, November 21 1955. FRUS 1955-1957 Volume X, 32-7](#)

[ii\) Letter from President Eisenhower to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, December 5 1955. FRUS 1955-1957 Volume IX, 10-12](#)

[iii\) Study Prepared by the Policy Planning Staff on Soviet Economic Penetration, April 4 1956, FRUS 1955-1957 Volume IX, 13-18](#)

iv) Some authors, of course, would disagree. See: [Stephen Rabe, Eisenhower: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism and Latin America \(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988\)](#) for the best outline of the argument that the primary US concern was with the Cold War. Even then, however, Rabe notes that the same core elements outlined in 1953 remained to the fore six years later.

[v\) Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 16 May 1958, FRUS 1958-1960 Volume V, 238-39](#)

[vi\) Memorandum of Discussion at the 366th Meeting of the National Security Council, 22 May 1958, Box No 10, NSC Series, Whitman File, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas: Memorandum from the Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles to the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, 27 May 1958, FRUS 1958-1960 Volume V, 252-55](#)

vii) Memorandum of Discussion at the 132nd NSC Meeting, 18 February 1953. Box No 4, NSC Series, Ann Whitman File, Eisenhower Library.

[viii\) Memorandum of Discussion at the 369th Meeting of the National Security Council, June 19 1958, FRUS 1958-1960, Volume V, 27-32](#)

ix) [Thomas Paterson, Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution \(New York: Oxford University Press, 1994\)](#); Lars Schoultz, That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 52-109

This entry was posted in [Horizonte](#), [Latin America](#), [Review](#), [US-Latin American Relations](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).