

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## Agency, Empire, and the United States in Cold War Latin America

Thomas C. Field Jr.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, AZ, USA  
Email: [thomas.c.field@gmail.com](mailto:thomas.c.field@gmail.com)

This essay reviews the following works:

**Cuban International Relations at 60: Reflections on Global Connections.** Edited by Mervyn J. Bain and Chris Walker. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. vi + 299. \$110.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781793630186.

**Itineraries or Expertise: Science Technology and the Environment in Latin America's Long Cold War.** Edited by Andra B. Chastain and Timothy W. Lorek. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 347. \$40.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780822945963.

**The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War: A Short History with Documents.** By Michelle Getchell. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2018. Pp. vii + 190. \$18.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781624667411.

**Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba during the Cold War.** By Hideaki Kami. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 360. \$51.99 cloth. ISBN: 9781108423427.

**A la sombra de la superpotencia: Tres presidentes mexicanos en la Guerra Fría, 1945–1958.** By Soledad Loaeza. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2022. Pp. 470. Mex\$360. ISBN: 9786075641669.

**Ethnographies of US Empire.** Edited by Carole McGranahan and John F. Collins. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 548. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478000235.

**Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil.** By Sarah Sarzynski. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 334. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781503603691.

**Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War.** By William Michael Schmidli. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 312. \$46.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781501765148.

**In Their Own Best Interest: A History of the US Effort to Improve Latin Americans.** By Lars Schoultz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. 392. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674984141.

**The Dictator Dilemma: The United States and Paraguay in the Cold War.** By Kirk Tyvela. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. Pp. x + 261. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780822965732.

Over the past two decades, a handful of respected scholars have hailed fresh approaches that decenter the United States in the history of Cold War Latin America. Appearing separately in a wide variety of edited volumes and journals, these historiographical surveys share one thing in common: a sense of relief that scholarship was finally taking stock of a wider variety of lived experiences in late-twentieth-century Latin America. Some praised increased sensitivity to the agency of Global South protagonists, others highlighted historical narratives that move beyond metropolitan policymaking to consider the unexpected impacts of far-flung policy implementation, and still others pointed to refreshing tendencies to explore nonstate actors and the transnational flows of ideas, culture, and money. Driven by broader globalization trends within the post-Cold War era intelligentsia, historiographers in the early 2000s largely agreed that it was time to put aside the dichotomous morality play of collaboration and resistance to empire and to rediscover twentieth-century US–Latin American relations not just as reflections of Cold War bipolarity but also as a dialectic process shaped partly by peripheral political actors.<sup>1</sup> Bucking this trend were two deans of Latin American Cold War history, Stephen Rabe and Greg Grandin, whose broad oeuvres—distinct from each other in many ways—have continued to employ an imperial framework to explain contemporary histories of the Western Hemisphere, where the United States has been hard to ignore as the most powerful force in political and economic affairs. In Rabe’s work, based mostly on US diplomatic and intelligence sources, Latin American elites sometimes play Washington for their own ends, but the United States usually gets what it wants out of what are invariably described as dependent relationships.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Greg Grandin has returned consistently to the concept of US empire for Cold War Latin America, even while carrying out highly regarded research that centers subaltern agency.<sup>3</sup>

With the keepers of the field somewhat divided over whether to center the United States as a hemispheric empire or hegemon, scholarship on Washington’s relations with Cold War Latin America is provoking intense debate. Most historians working on the region continue to favor the decentering of power analyses away from the United States

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph, “Border Crossings and the Remaking of Latin American Cold War Studies,” *Cold War History* 19, no. 1 (2019): 141–170; Andrew J. Kirkendall, “Cold War Latin America: The State of the Field,” *H-Diplo*, November 14, 2014; Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Max Paul Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States—Latin American Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (2003): 621–636; Greg Grandin, “Off the Beach: The United States, Latin America, and the Cold War,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 426–445.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Rabe’s work since the turn of the last century includes: *US Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Kissinger and Latin America: Intervention, Human Rights, and Diplomacy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the power of the United States is Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006). Centering local agency is Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). This insistence on continuing to focus attention on US hegemony is also present in Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

and the discovery of the international history of Latin America on the region's own terms.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, others—especially historians concurrently analyzing the exercise of US power outside Latin America—have criticized those who seem programmed to downplay the role of the United States in setting political and economic parameters in its spheres of influence. Most recently, these critics of recent trends in transnational and global history have argued for US foreign relations historians to recenter the Cold War, to “bring the United States . . . back to the center,” and to “think with empire” when carrying out research on US influence in the Global South.<sup>5</sup>

Calling for dialogue between US foreign relations history and new imperial history movements in Eurasia, some of these recent historiographers advocate for returning to the concept of empire, not as a universally negative or totalizing concept, or as the “negation of freedom,” but as a tool of analysis that illuminates how sovereign hierarchies in the international system often foster real (albeit unequal) political, ideological, and economic exchange, not to mention “non-coercive modes of imperial power,” meaningful political participation by peripheral actors, and broad experiential heterogeneity.<sup>6</sup> Believing it is “high time to rescue the idea” of imperial studies—“warts and all”—and to “put it back where it belongs—at the center of the discussion of what in fact has become the most extensive international system in history,” new imperial historians reject US-based scholars’ tendency to reduce “empire” talk to “a radical critique of US foreign policy,” reminding us that all of history’s empires “did more than merely repress and exploit,” taking pains not to “undermine the authority of friendly local elites.”<sup>7</sup>

At its best, a new imperial history approach to US foreign policy in Latin America would discard negative “superlatives and loud epithets,” moving beyond modernist caricatures of empire as a “grim totality of unlimited domination and coercion.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, a fresh

---

<sup>4</sup> At its most extreme is Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), which foregrounds local agency while downplaying US power in Latin America. Other historians exploring local agency—including myself—have remained reluctant to employ the language and analysis of imperial studies, even while crafting narratives of overwhelming US power. See, e.g., Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Virginia Garrard-Burnett and Mark Atwood Lawrence, eds., *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow: New Histories of Latin America's Cold War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Thomas C. Field Jr., *From Development to Dictatorship: Bolivia and the Alliance for Progress in the Kennedy Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). For an important exception, which uses political economy to analyze the global role of private empire builders like J. Peter Grace and the Rockefellers, see Amy Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). Yet even here, Offner does not always highlight the close links between global capitalist forces and the directing hand of the imperial state.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (2020): 38–55; Paul Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–1391. One of the books that has provoked intense debate about the balance between structure and agency in the Global South's Cold War is Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1378, 1380, 1391. Regarding the development of new imperial history in Eurasia, which had been mostly ignored in the United States, see James Thompson, “Modern Britain and the New Imperial History,” *History Compass* 5 (2007): 455–462; I. Gerasimov, S. Glebov, A. Kaplunovski, M. Mogilner, and A. Semyonov, “In Search of a New Imperial History,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2005): 33–56; “Some Paradoxes of the ‘New Imperial History’” (editorial note), *Kritika* 1 (2000): 623–25; Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1996): 345–363. For sweeping analyses of the paradoxical connection between empire and diversity, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Cox, “Empire by Denial? Debating US Power,” *Security Dialogue* 35 (2004): 230–234.

<sup>8</sup> Gerasimov et al., “In Search of a New Imperial History,” 33, 53–54.

approach to the concept of empire would accept the experiential reality of living in and through international power hierarchies, unequally shared spaces comprising a diverse array of metropolitan and peripheral actors that willingly engage in “imperial hegemonic transaction.” To accomplish a renaissance of imperial studies in the history of US foreign relations toward Latin America, it will be necessary to take account of imperial case studies that are “based on co-optation as much as on occupation, and on support as well as on submission.”<sup>9</sup> This requires dialogue with imperial histories of the United States in Africa and Asia, not to mention research on the Black Power movement and older scholarship on US imperial practices in Latin America, including work by the so-called Wisconsin school, which was more sensitive to local and nonstate agency than is acknowledged today.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, as this review essay demonstrates, much of the recent work on Cold War Latin America continues to manifest a distinct reluctance to engage explicitly with the supposedly atavistic terminology of empire and dependency. Yet almost in spite of themselves, nearly all these scholars engage tacitly with what new imperial history scholars would call the unequally shared reality of living in the late-twentieth-century, US-led imperial system.

Whether focusing on the Latin American periphery, in the first half of the essay, or on metropolitan foreign policy designed in Washington, in the second, these works contribute new evidence, almost unwittingly, to support an emerging collective understanding about the shared exercise of power across US-led imperial space. Without employing the language of imperial studies, this recent scholarship unpacks several paradoxes about how local agency interacts with US-led hegemonic structural politics to produce a great diversity of heterogeneous experiences of life in Washington’s Western Hemisphere imperium.

One example of Latin Americanists’ persisting ambivalence to the concept of empire is Andra Chastain and Timothy Lorek’s *Itineraries of Expertise*, which explicitly rejects an imperious interpretation of US Cold War involvement in Latin America. Dismissing as too top-down the conclusions of critical development studies literature, including recent work on military-led modernization, Chastain and Lorek frame their volume as an exploration of how the ideological Cold War was fought on the ground, at the level of expertise, with local scientists and agronomists asserting themselves in shaping the meaning of modernity in each country.<sup>11</sup> Despite its editors’ aim of bypassing the supposedly US-centric considerations of imperial social science, most of the volume’s twelve rich case studies

<sup>9</sup> Jean-François Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies: A Political Invention of Tradition?,” *Public Culture* 23 (2011): 70–72.

<sup>10</sup> On Africa, see Andrew Zimmerman, “Africa in Imperial and Transnational History: Multi-Sited Historiography and the Necessity of Theory,” *Journal of African History* 54 (2013): 331–340. On Asia, see Kornel Chang, “Independence without Liberation: Democratization as Decolonization Management in US-Occupied Korea, 1945–1948,” *Journal of American History* 107 (2020): 77–106. On US imperialism and Black Power, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). For examples of local and nonstate agency in older imperial histories of the United States in Latin America, see Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Stephen G. Rabe, *The Road to OPEC: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1919–1976* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> On modernization theory, which has been the subject of much literature on US-Asian relations, see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression: Police-Training and Nation-Building in the American Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). On military-led modernization in Latin America, see Field, *From Development to Dictatorship*.

proceed to explore these precise transnational hierarchies of US-led power-as-knowledge. Framed by an exhaustive historiographical first chapter by Gilbert Joseph and a thoughtful theoretical conclusion by Eden Medina and Mark Carey, the volume consists of four contributions on Chile, three on Colombia, two on Mexico, and one each on Cuba and Peru.

Lorek's own excellent chapter on the Green Revolution describes how Colombian agronomists played an instigating role in "recruiting transnational connections" (109) from empire-adjacent actors such as the Rockefeller Foundation, and Thomas Rath's illuminating chapter on foot-and-mouth disease reveals how Mexican and Brazilian experts employed "strategies for coping with the postwar US government's enormous power and scientific authority" (173). In fact, nearly every chapter foregrounds at least one imperial relationship in which Latin Americans navigated and reimagined their dependent ties to Global North patrons and US-based institutions: the Tennessee Valley Authority, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) collaborator and Catholic entrepreneur J. Peter Grace, the US Agency for International Development, the US Department of Agriculture, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Organization of American States, and the US Bureau of Reclamation. In an exception that proves the rule, Chastain's chapter (another one of the volume's best) describes how Chile tried to secure greater autonomy from Washington's hemispheric empire by reaching out to Charles de Gaulle's France and staking out a "nonaligned" third way in the Cold War. As Chastain points out, Chile's nonaligned gambit ironically emerged during the Christian Democratic administration of Eduardo Frei, which had been elected in 1964 with secret funding from the CIA (243).<sup>12</sup> At its strongest, and chapters by Tore Olsson and Mary Roldán also come to mind, *Itineraries of Expertise* engages subtly with the implications of living in imperial space, mostly as a shared reality negotiated in this volume by confident and capable experts from some of Latin America's more developed countries, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil. In the process, the volume reveals a delightful complexity of local strategies for navigating transnational hierarchies of power and knowledge.

If the heterogeneity of Latin American responses to US power has convinced some historians to decenter the imperial nature of Western Hemisphere political hierarchies, *Ethnographies of US Empire* moves in the opposite direction. Taking an explicit and global approach to US empire, its editors Carole McGranahan and John Collins vow to pull back the curtain on the "slippery entity" of Washington's "empire in denial," mostly through what they call "'deep' fieldwork" that reveals contemporary experiences of living with and through US-dominated imperial relationships. These are described not as negations of subaltern agency but as an unequally shared constellation of "linked experiences" that create an often "invisible" albeit distinct "way of life" within Washington's global imperium (1, 3–4). Geographically expansive, the volume contains twenty-two case study chapters, divided into six sections that explore local manifestations of US empire from the nineteenth-century Western frontier to twentieth-century overseas territories, including chapters that analyze empire as a Cold War strategic formation in Latin America and also as a manifestation of Washington's Global War on Terror after September 11, 2001. Bookended by a thick theoretical introduction by Collins and McGranahan and a wide-ranging interview with the empire scholar Ann Stoler, the volume consists of seven chapters on indigenous resistance to pan-European territorial conquest in mainland North America and overseas territories, ten chapters on global case studies (including Korea, Suriname, Ecuador, Brazil, Tibet, Cambodia, and Nicaragua), and five essays on US cultures of militarism and imperialism.

Perhaps typical of contemporary US-based scholarship that explicitly the language of imperial studies, the editors of *Ethnographies of US Empire* emphasize empire's negative

<sup>12</sup> For more Third World gambits by Latin American nationalists, see Thomas C. Field Jr., Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettinà, eds., *Latin America and the Global Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

aspects, such as pathologies of domination and resistance. Yet most of the volume's best chapters, centering on case studies outside the politicized terrain of Native American and Latin American studies, advance more trenchant explanations for why and how weaker partners often choose to participate in imperial formations. For example, in brilliant chapters regarding the cultural, economic, and emotional impact of US intervention in Samoa, Philippines, and Tibet, authors Fa'anofo Lisaclaire Uperesa, Jan Padios, and volume editor McGranahan, respectively, describe how moderate nationalists are often the most enthusiastic participants in imperial relationships, seeing them as the best way to ensure the progress of one's own people or, in Uperesa's words, as methods to "produce themselves as empowered subjects even in contexts over which they have little control" (143). Other excellent chapters discuss the unexpected results of local engagement with imperial formations in contemporary Hawai'i, Cold War Korea, and early 2000s Ecuador. By examining US foreign policy toward to broader Global South, *Ethnographies of US Empire* makes a strong case for more explicit employment imperial analysis for Cold War Latin America, where the complexity of shared imperial relationships blurred lines between metropolitan and peripheral protagonists, as well as between state and nonstate actors.

Despite the fact that these two edited volumes take contrary approaches to describing empire as a historical determinant, both collections refreshingly depict peripheral actors mostly engaging with empire on their own terms rather than resisting it outright. Of the six monographs reviewed here, Sarah Sarzynski's *Revolution in the Terra do Sol* comes closest to delivering this kind of grassroots narrative of life in imperial space, albeit one in which peripheral actors occasionally move beyond participation toward rupture and outright resistance. Centered on her research regarding the origins and development of Brazil's *ligas camponeses* (peasant leagues) at the height of the Cold War, Sarzynski's original and engaging work reveals how rural trade-union activists worked to reinvent (or "trans-code") negative regional stereotypes of Brazil's northeastern "Other," drawing upon familiar cultural tropes that would "be useful in constructing identities of resistance" (14, 65, 242–243). The book employs a wealth of sources, including US and Brazilian government documents, secret police files from the provincial capital of Recife, and contemporary press and scholarly portrayals of Brazil's rural development, leveraging critical development and cultural studies to demystify Brazil's infamous peasant leagues, which are frequently portrayed in Cold War literature as little more than Cuban-inspired threats to the country's established order. Aside from illuminating this important node in Latin America's Cold War, Sarzynski's book represents a model for incorporating several planes of analysis, global, national, and local, as her work moves seamlessly from discussion of local peasant priorities to broader political designs hatched by Washington's the US Agency for International Development, the Catholic Church, and Cuba's allies in the Brazilian Communist Party. Capped off with a smart two-chapter quasi epilogue regarding oral history and memory, *Revolution in Terra do Sol* greatly advances scholars' ongoing attempt to better situate contemporary Latin America in broader global narratives of development on what she calls the "so-called margins" of the Global South (244).

As suggested in the decision by Brazil's peasant leagues to align themselves with revolutionary Cuba in the early 1960s, peripheral actors occasionally abandon their preferred tactic of selective engagement with empire, opting for resistance. The next two books explore these relatively rare moments of imperial rupture, starting with Michelle Getchell's brief survey on the origins of the October 1962 standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union over the future of the island of Cuba. Despite its title, *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War*, Getchell's book contains relatively little coverage of the crisis itself. Instead, the bulk of Getchell's book (70 narrative pages of 123) emphasizes a series of background topics, pointing readers to the best monographs available on the origins of the Cold War, its spillover into Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, Cuba's break with Washington in 1960, and the CIA's subsequent Bay of Pigs debacle a year later. In part

tailored to readers with little prior knowledge of Cuba's previous semicolonial status or of Washington's long history of meddling in the island's affairs, the book's valuable appendices nonetheless contain sixty-four pages of primary source documents, with broad empirical evidence revealing Cuba's search for, and eventual frustration with, the limits of Soviet military support for its counterimperial foreign policy.

Picking up the story of Cuba's resistance to US empire after the missile crisis, Mervyn Bain and Chris Walker's *Cuban International Relations at 60* describes Havana's global campaign to forge wide-ranging political and economic ties beyond the Cold War divide. A compilation of essays first presented at a late 2019 conference in Halifax, the volume showcases speakers and authors who are universally sympathetic to Havana's insistence upon foreign relations sovereignty, starting with chapters by a pair of diplomats from Cuba and the United States who played leading roles in the two countries' brief period of rapprochement in 2015. Indeed, the first half of the book covers the well-trodden territory of Cuban anti-imperialism vis-à-vis the United States, followed by an excellent second half on Havana's counterhegemonic foreign policy beyond the US sphere of influence. Despite the volume's lack of ideological diversity, readers will learn a great deal about Cuba's rapidly expanding economic ties with Russia and China since the turn of the twenty-first century, the contradictions long plaguing Western European relations with Cuba, and the bitter diplomatic crisis created in 2017 after US and Canadian officials suffered mysterious health issues in post-rapprochement Havana.

While Latin American actors employed various overlapping strategies of collaboration and resistance to manage their shared reality of living in Washington's sphere of influence during the Cold War, the rest of this review focuses on monographs that explicitly address bilateral, state-to-state relations with the United States. The richness of US foreign relations archives, partially declassified in thirty- to fifty-year cycles, provides a valuable window into imperial strategies, especially in Latin America, where Washington's influence has historically been strongest. Far from depicting a rogue aggressor, White House national security documents and State Department archives often reveal the limits of US power and Washington's constant quest for cooperative local elites. Moreover, to temper the inequities of corrupt natural resource grabs by empire-adjacent capitalists, US presidential administrations of both parties have frequently engaged in sustained outreach to so-called moderates on the periphery: developmentalists, reformers, and cooperative leftists and nationalists of every political stripe.<sup>13</sup>

Of the foreign relations histories reviewed here, the most traditional, bilateral diplomatic approach is Kirk Tyvela's *The Dictator Dilemma*, which addresses the infrequently studied case of Paraguay, led from 1954 to 1989 by General Alfredo Stroessner. Comfortably situated within Cold War studies literature, *The Dictator Dilemma* divides US foreign policy makers into "skeptics," who believed US national interest required tolerance of steadfast anticommunist allies like Stroessner, and "reformists," who were embarrassed by Paraguay's authoritarianism. Even its chapters are organized by US presidential administration. Yet *The Dictator Dilemma* reveals unexpected patterns of Paraguayan agency, such as when the Stroessner government successfully secured reluctant imperial patronage through the emerging Third World game of soliciting aid and recognition from the socialist camp in the late 1950s and early 1960s (35–39, 59). In

<sup>13</sup> In part due to metropolitan scholars' reliance on subject countries' nationalist historiography that reduces US empire to capitalist opposition to Third World economic (or resource) nationalism, Washington's preference for moderate (often middle-class) nationalists in the Global South is rarely acknowledged. This analytical problem is discussed in Nick Cullather's brilliant but often overlooked *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States—Philippines Relations, 1942–1960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), as well as in Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. It is further developed in Field, *From Development to Dictatorship*, and the first half of Field, Krepp, and Pettinà, *Latin America and the Global Cold War*.

response to Washington's favorable reply, Stroessner agreed to embed CIA officers in Paraguay's security services, leaving the country fully incorporated in the US sphere of influence and postponing Washington's "dictator dilemma" until superpower détente emerged alongside a growing foreign policy moralism in the mid-1970s. After that point, US foreign policy "reformists" steadily gained influence until an acceptably moderate opposition movement could be formed among Paraguayan Catholics and dissident members of the general's own political party in the late 1980s. Unfortunately, *The Dictator Dilemma's* near-total reliance on US State Department documents reveals little about the conservative nationalist ideologies that motivated Stroessner and his supporters. Moreover, one learns little about watchful operations of the CIA Station in Asunción, which as a sort of imperial viceroy ensured that the White House National Security Council could remain comfortably "detached" from Paraguayan affairs for much of the Cold War (169).

As in Stroessner's Paraguay, nationalist elites in Cold War Mexico chose to pursue their country's interests through selective engagement with, rather than outright resistance to, US-led imperial formations. To some extent, Mexican collaboration with its powerful northern neighbor was a geographical fait accompli, according to Soledad Loaeza, whose *A la sombra de la superpotencia* (In the superpower's shadow) represents one of the most balanced recent monographs in the crossed genre of bilateral diplomatic and national history. Drawing evenly on declassified national security files in Washington and in Mexico City, Loaeza's probing narrative reveals how Mexico's second generation of revolutionary elites identified points of leverage within Washington's sphere of influence, often flexing their political muscle in international fora even while riding the coattails of an empire that seemed to need Mexico as much as the latter needed the United States. Not easily defined as anti-imperial resistance or as pro-imperial collaboration, postwar Mexico's subtle nationalism is increasingly being appreciated by historians as a global model for what later came to be known as the 1970s politics of Third World nonalignment.<sup>14</sup> Smartly periodized alongside three transformative presidential administrations between 1940 and 1958, Loaeza's book convincingly explains how structural elements at the international and national level combined to "domesticate" Mexico's personalistic presidency into a more institutionalized (albeit just as powerful) instrument for pursuing the national interest in a society that considered itself both revolutionary and allied with the Western capitalist democracies led by the United States (17). One important highlight of Loaeza's meticulous study includes a series of paradoxical episodes in which the specter of US intervention shaped Mexican politics even when Washington had no intention of meddling. This occurred with particular frequency during Latin America's so-called democratic spring in the late 1940s, when US officials believed that Mexico's revolutionary elites were willing to selectively, if discretely, collaborate with Washington, while the country's oppositionist conservative Catholics harbored strong anti-Anglo-Saxon sentiments. Like Tyvela's work on Paraguay, Loaeza omits recent revelations about CIA operations, which in Mexico reveal a more interventionist pattern of methods and priorities than the softer diplomatic records of the State Department.<sup>15</sup> Yet Loaeza presents a model of new imperial history, because exploring Mexican agency in no way requires ignorance of structural hierarchies such as Cold War Latin America's "restricted sovereignty" and "deepening dependency" (448–450).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Christy Thornton, *Revolution in Development: Mexico and the Governance of the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), and chapters by Thornton and Vanni Pettinà in Field, Krepp, and Pettinà, *Latin America and the Global Cold War*.

<sup>15</sup> Jefferson Morley, *Our Man in Mexico: Winston Scott and the Hidden History of the CIA* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).



If political elites in Paraguay and Mexico opted to pursue their countries' interests through selective collaboration and engagement with US-led imperial formations, revolutionary Cuba remained a more vexing problem for the United States deep into the late Cold War. In this review's best and most innovative monograph, Hideaki Kami analyzes the evolution of the antagonistic US-Cuban relationship in the 1970s and 1980s, revealing that even a stalwart anti-imperialist like Cuba eventually found it useful to engage selectively with shared, imperial cultural and legal norms, especially after mid-1970s superpower détente opened space for transcending or even subverting bipolar orthodoxies. Sensing a strategic vulnerability in the United States' relatively closed immigration policy, Havana found rare common ground with dissident émigrés in Miami, who agreed with the Cuban government's provocative demand for fewer US restrictions on migration outflows from the island to Florida. Chronologically balanced into two halves—before and after the 1980 Mariel boatlift crisis—*Diplomacy Meets Migration* draws on an impressive array of declassified documents from US presidential libraries, the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations, and émigré political files in Miami. Kami meanwhile complements the monograph with high-level oral history interviews, as well a host of third-party foreign ministry archives of imperial allies who maintained ties with Cuba—Mexico, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom—to present a more detached assessment of this extremely tense bilateral conflict. US-Cuban relations is a crowded field of study, but the book's strategy of moving into the late Cold War and its deft use of documentary triangulation reveal unexpected and fascinating aspects of a well-known narrative, representing a model of new imperial history in which state and nonstate actors interact to construct shared experiences at the heart of the US sphere of influence. Beautifully written with proper empathy given toward actors in all three nodes of historical action—Washington, Havana, and Miami—*Diplomacy Meets Migration* is an enormous contribution to the social and diplomatic history of migration and to the political and parapolitical complexities of a central zone of imperial rupture within Latin America's Cold War.

In another late Cold War narrative that centers on a key challenge to Washington's Western Hemisphere empire, Michael Schmidli's *Freedom on the Offensive* contextualizes US responses to the Nicaraguan revolution within the Reagan administration's evolving human rights diplomacy of the 1980s. As his subtitle's mention of "interventionism" suggests, Schmidli's book interprets the Reagan-era shift toward "democracy promotion" through a slightly more explicit imperial lens than other recent literature. This analytical decision offers one of the best explanations for the Republican president's decision to appoint a number of high-profile liberal Cold Warriors to his administration, including Jeane Kirkpatrick and Elliot Abrams. Thus avoiding the pitfalls of more partisan histories of this era, which describe Reagan's foreign policy as an abandonment of human rights and democracy promotion by a cabal of rightwing ideologues, *Freedom on the Offensive* narrates the Reagan-era origins of an innovative network of liberal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), under the umbrella of the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Led from its 1983 founding by the head of the Social Democrats USA, Carl Gershman, the NED network responded directly to Reagan's critical observation that Washington's previous human rights diplomacy had been tepidly "selective" during the conservative realist 1970s: "We took countries that were pro-Western . . . and we punished them at the same time that we were claiming détente with [communist] countries where there are no human rights" (144).<sup>16</sup> As Schmidli writes, beginning with the

<sup>16</sup> Also making this connection between liberal human rights principles and the evolution toward interventionism is Vanessa Walker's excellent *Principles in Power: Latin America and the Politics of US Human Rights Diplomacy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). For a narrative rejecting the liberal label for Reagan-era foreign policy toward Latin America, see Andrew J. Kirkendall, *Hemispheric Alliances: Liberal Democrats and Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), esp. 229–253.

Reagan administration, democracy promotion became a sustained process of spreading US domestic cultures of liberal capitalism abroad, in both allied and enemy countries, where Washington was able to create and foster pro-Western political parties, press outlets, labor unions, and academic institutions. Although it rarely uses the language of imperial studies, *Freedom of the Offensive* is another engagingly written new imperial history of intervention and regime change in the Global South, representing one of the first and best origin stories of resurgent liberal internationalism as the Cold War came to a close.

Complementing Schmidli's presentist relevance regarding the renaissance of liberal intervention in the 1980s and 1990s, political scientist Lars Schoultz's *In Their Own Best Interest* provides a convincing analysis of what he sees as US elites' paternalistic approach to imperial "uplift" in Latin America. Similar in approach to Schoultz's *Beneath the United States*, addressing racialized US development strategies in the nineteenth century, *In Their Own Best Interest* updates the story to take account of the growing institutionalization of globalizing US development strategies in the middle and late Cold War.<sup>17</sup> More theoretical than documentary, the book explicitly treats the US foreign aid industry as an ethnographic subject, contributing important ideas to our growing body of knowledge about hierarchies of expertise and power in the Americas. The last three chapters are especially revealing, as they provide another fresh narrative of the emergence of the NED "democracy promotion" network of liberal NGOs, which has come to employ thousands of government officials and private contractors, active in shaping in political parties, labor unions, press outlets, and universities all over the world. In a provocative conclusion, Schoultz predicts that the development industry's many liberal, altruistic employees will continue to serve as "handmaidens" (297) for conservative, empire-building national security strategists as long as the money continues to flow.

Judging from this survey of recent literature at the crossroads of US foreign relations and Cold War Latin America, scholars—often in spite of themselves—continue to display intense interest in transnational hierarchies of power and ideology. Parallel to the works already mentioned, several other new monographs have similarly engaged with the concept of empire (some more explicitly than others) while exploring the expected manifestations of US development programs, unequal migration patterns, interventionist human rights diplomacy, and the nature of capitalist political economy.<sup>18</sup> Placed alongside traditional diplomatic history scholarship that focused principally on US power in Latin America, recent work helps to flesh out local strategies of political, cultural, and economic expression, both at the elite and at the subaltern levels. It is encouraging to witness greater dialogue between foreign policy historians and Latin Americanists, who together display sensitivity to the heterogeneous experiences of the Cold War while hopefully avoiding the mistake of ignoring power differentials that are always present in international and transnational relations.<sup>19</sup> As researchers increasingly draw on multinational archives in state and nonstate repositories, the future of Latin American international history remains intimately tied to imperial studies, whether we like it or not.

<sup>17</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of US Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> For a small sample, see Molly Geidel, *Peace Corps Fantasies: How Development Shaped the Global Sixties* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, *Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Amy Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> For a model of this kind of cross-pollination, see Vanni Pettinà, *A Compact History of Latin America's Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), which presents a convincing analysis of Latin American agency within bipolar and imperial structures.

**Thomas C. Field Jr.** is professor of social science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. He is author of *From Development to Dictatorship: Bolivia and the Alliance for Progress in the Kennedy Era* (Cornell, 2014), which won the Thomas McGann Award from the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies. For his research on US foreign policy in Latin America, he has also been awarded the 2021 Robert W. Cherny Article Prize from the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, and the 2012 Stuart L. Bernath Article Prize, from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

---

**Cite this article:** Field, Thomas C., Jr. (2024). Agency, Empire, and the United States in Cold War Latin America. *Latin American Research Review* 59, 492–502. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.42>