

AFTER DECENTERING
The Politics of Agency and Hegemony
in Hemispheric Relations

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Hemispheric Giants: The Misunderstood History of U.S.-Brazilian Relations.

By Britta H. Crandall. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010. Pp. viii + 211. \$70.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781442207875.

Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War. By Tanya Harmer. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 375. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780807834954.

No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere since 1776. By Brian Loveman. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. 539. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780807833711.

Latin America and the Illusion of Peace. By David R. Mares. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2012. Pp. 204. \$16.99 paper. ISBN: 9780415638461.

The Bolivian Revolution and the United States, 1952 to the Present. By James F. Siekmeier. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 210. \$64.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780271037792.

Both the conduct and the study of inter-American relations have diversified and expanded over the two decades since the Cold War's end. The third wave of democratic transitions and the rise of globalization and neoliberal economics altered policy agendas across the hemisphere, as did subsequent challenges to democratic consolidation and to neoliberal orthodoxy, along with the increasing salience of intermestic issues and nontraditional threats.¹ Meanwhile, diverging academic trends, particularly along methodological lines, raised concerns about disciplinary fragmentation even as they allowed scholars to approach a given topic from new and competing perspectives. This proliferation of issues and methods stimulated scholars of inter-American relations to branch out from qualitative analyses and historical narratives of the interactions of national governments. In particular, researchers employed a variety of approaches to analyze the increasing role of nonstate actors and transnational forces in hemispheric affairs (while

1. For overviews of these trends at end of the twentieth century, see Jorge I. Domínguez, ed., *The Future of Inter-American Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2000), and Albert Fishlow and James Jones, eds., *The United States and the Americas: A Twenty-First Century View* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

retaining a vigilant awareness of state power).² Amid such diversity, a cluster of recent books on hemispheric affairs, including regional analyses and case studies of Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia, clearly demonstrates that traditional analyses of foreign policy and diplomatic history continue to thrive.

Traditional to a point, that is. Revisionist moves that once seemed radical, such as systematically critiquing the United States' intentions and interventions in Latin America, or decentering the focus of study from Washington in order to account for Latin American agency in hemispheric affairs, are increasingly common, particularly for the Cold War period.³ All five of the volumes under review here are premised upon one or both of these shifts, which suggests an emerging consensus in the field. For instance, making a decentering argument in *The Bolivian Revolution and the United States, 1952 to the Present*, James Siekmeier asserts that Bolivian leaders frequently managed to influence the terms of US-Bolivian relations (1–5, 38–39, 90–91). Similarly, Britta H. Crandall argues in *Hemispheric Giants: The Misunderstood History of U.S.-Brazilian Relations* that the United States has never truly neglected Brazil and that the ebb and flow of US-Brazilian engagement since the establishment of the Old Republic has had as much to do with Brazilian preferences as with North American ones (2, 5, 52). Likewise, Tanya Harmer explains in *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* that Salvador Allende faced not only headwinds from Washington but also the intersecting storm fronts created by other regional players (particularly Cuba and Brazil), and global issues like détente and Third World development, but managed to chart his own policy course (2–3, 6, 221). At the regional level, David R. Mares claims that Latin American conflict decision making, much like that of other countries, is driven largely by national interests and institutions and domestic political incentives—in other words, not dictated or even much constrained by a regional hegemon or hemispheric norms and organizations (63–91). This creates a serious possibility of militarized conflict, as suggested by the title of Mares's book, *Latin America and the Illusion of Peace*. And Brian Loveman's sweeping narrative *No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere since 1776* emphasizes policy continuity, arguing that “two centuries of disdain” by the United States toward Latin America, marked by malevolent interventions, were in many ways unexceptional

2. See, e.g., Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); William I. Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism: A Critical Globalization Perspective* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Fred Rosen, ed., *Empire and Dissent: The United States and Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and most recently Marisa von Bülow, *Building Transnational Networks: Civil Society and the Politics of Trade in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), winner of LASA's inaugural Luciano Tomassini Latin American International Relations Book Award.

3. On decentering, see particularly 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; also Federico Gil, *Latin American–United States Relations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). For critiques of US policy, see, e.g., Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

(400). The United States acted like other great powers, US decision makers were heavily influenced by domestic political considerations, and the United States was unable to insulate itself from the consequences of intervention, since the increase in military activity abroad fed back into the institutions and values of the republic (Loveman, 2, 14–16, 26, 39, 187).

These shared premises are so strong that the books' overarching, and broadly convincing, theses sometimes seem to lack opponents. For instance, Crandall's subtitle is *The Misunderstood History of U.S.-Brazilian Relations*, but it is not entirely clear who misunderstands this relationship, since Crandall generally cites other scholars' work approvingly and pins the "neglect assumption" (i.e., that the United States has long overlooked Brazil, a view that "pervades the literature") on a few recent nonacademic works and a 1960 book by Walt Rostow (3, 88). As Crandall recognizes (192), the idea that shared priorities drive cooperation is not particularly novel; thus, a scholarly treatment that decenters the US-Brazil relationship may well be correct, but it also seems uncontroversial. Likewise, although Mares's claim that ongoing disputes in Latin America pose risks of escalation is persuasive, it is harder to accept without direct citations the assertions that "most analysts" (11) or "many Latin Americans" (169) in fact labor under what his title calls an "illusion of peace" due to a misplaced faith in the effects of democracy, integration, and regional institutions on foreign policy. And when Siekmeier argues that Bolivia "managed to exert a degree of control" (1) or "assert a degree of agency" (5) in its dealings with the United States, or more concretely (150) that Bolivian leaders' termination of the Peace Corps mission in 1971 shows that they "were not slavishly adhering to U.S. policy in all respects," he is surely right; however, one wonders whether the contrary position has any serious defenders. Furthermore, although Harmer successfully transcends the "narrow historiography of blame" regarding the origins of the 1973 Chilean coup, the arguments that Chileans were not "manipulated" or "hoodwinked" from abroad, let alone solely by the "masterminding" of US "puppet masters," and thus that the United States' "power to control events south of the Rio Grande was more limited than is commonly suggested," echo rather than contradict much scholarly work on the Allende years (7, 221, 252–253, 260, 265, 271).⁴ Finally, Loveman's argument about long-term continuities in US interventionism follows (as Loveman recognizes) a number of other scholars who have already opposed the "isolationist myth" (i.e., that at least until the Spanish-American War, if not World War II, the United States essentially refrained from interventions) (9). The few works to which Loveman

4. The thesis about US limitations and Chilean agency is consistent with the canonical political science explanation for the collapse of Allende's regime (emphasizing domestic political polarization, along with electoral, military, and partisan institutions), absent from Harmer's otherwise outstanding bibliography: Arturo Valenzuela, "Chile," in *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, ed. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, part 4 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Similarly, because more recent scholarship recognizes both Chilean and non-Washington-based foreign contributions to the crisis that toppled Allende, Harmer's framing of debates occasionally seems a bit forced, as in the reduction of Jonathan Haslam's discussion of "assisted suicide" to an exemplar of "blame" and "masterminding" (7). See Jonathan Haslam, *The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende's Chile: A Case of Assisted Suicide* (New York: Verso, 2005), particularly xiv, 226–228.

attributes an isolationist thesis focus neither on US-Latin American relations nor particularly on the nineteenth century, the critical areas for evaluating isolationist claims (2, 9). In all, these books suggest a broad consensus that Latin American governments had a meaningful degree of autonomy in foreign affairs and that their efforts often resisted, at times constrained, and at least indirectly influenced US foreign policy.

The primary contributions of these volumes, therefore, lie in their analytical craftsmanship, particularly in the use of fine-grained evidence about specific foreign affairs episodes to build narratives of ambitious chronological or geographical scope, rather than in the novelty of their central arguments. Loveman's tome, based on a career of research (469), meticulously traces US activity in the Americas from 1776 up to the Obama administration. Loveman wields an extensive array of secondary and published primary sources on US foreign policy and continually suggests instructive parallels between events at far remove, such as the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty of 1846 and the foundations of the 2003 Iraq War (355), or the goals of Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 and 1905 annual messages to Congress and the warnings of Dwight Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address (180). Crandall combines archival and published US policy documents in earlier chapters and oral history records and elite interviews in later ones; this allows a consistently close focus on high-level US decision makers while succinctly covering more than a century of US-Brazilian relations. Siekmeier focuses on two decades of US-Bolivian relations (1952–1971) working from archives in the United States, Bolivia, and the United Kingdom (backed by published records and interviews with diplomats and former Peace Corps volunteers). He covers roots going back at least to the Chaco War and extends the legacies of the Bolivian revolution with a discussion of the government of Evo Morales. Mares's comparative analysis of contemporary Latin American conflict "hot spots" (93) employs a clear theoretical framework that identifies nonobvious patterns in the newspaper articles, online commentary, and institutional reports on which scholars addressing multiple contemporary cases must often rely, and also generates predictions and recommendations. Harmer traces the international engagements and significance of the crisis-beset Allende regime from Brazil to Cuba, the United States, and Poland. In doing so she not only raises the bar for multiarchival, multinational research in inter-American relations but also writes an elegant narrative backed with persuasive notes that demonstrate painstaking cross-checking of sources (e.g., pp. 39–46, 96–106 and their endnotes).

Closer analysis reveals clearer divisions among these books and indicates at least four major questions for future research. First, to what extent do claims about a particular case hold up when placed in comparative perspective, and how can scholars tell whether the case is representative of a broader class, or an outlier? The volumes by Siekmeier, Crandall, and Harmer each portray a different Latin American country as the region's trendsetter, particularly but not exclusively during the Cold War. Siekmeier (134, 166) calls Bolivia a "laboratory" for US development and security policy in postwar Latin America (language reminiscent of Grandin's *Empire's Workshop*), and argues that Bolivia held a "special" place in the Alliance for Progress (92). He repeatedly labels Bolivia a "trailblazer" (79, 152,

178) or early adopter of policies about to sweep the hemisphere and concludes by arguing that “what happens in Bolivia is a window looking onto what will happen throughout the region” (179). Similarly, Crandall often interprets the United States’ Latin America policy as focused on Brazil, whether under Woodrow Wilson (35–36) or Jimmy Carter (119, 126–127). In contrast with Siekmeier, Crandall sees Brazil as occupying “center stage” in John F. Kennedy’s anticommunist efforts, including the Alliance for Progress, since (somewhat anachronistically paraphrasing Richard Nixon) “as goes Brazil, so goes the rest of Latin America” (93). For her part, Harmer argues that both the Allende and Richard Nixon administrations saw Chile as a “model” or “demonstration area” for the course of the regional Cold War (261).⁵

More broadly, Loveman (5, 363) applies the “laboratory” metaphor to the entire region, arguing that successive US administrations from independence on developed in Latin America the techniques of hegemony that their successors would export across the globe. Within this perspective, each intervention is emblematic of the effort to establish the Americas as a “secure bastion” (5, 33, 295) for the expanding United States. However, as Loveman recounts, some of the United States’ earliest battles came against Great Britain, Native American tribes, and North African pirate states, many of which had arguably (according to US decision makers) attacked the United States first; as a result, it is not always clear whether the “bastion” has aggressive rather than defensive overtones and which territories constitute the original “laboratory.” In the contemporary era, Mares uses Operation Phoenix (the 2008 Colombian military incursion into Ecuadorean territory against FARC guerrillas, which produced a regional crisis) as a leitmotif for the broader pattern of regional disputes, portending new dangers, since “all such incidents have the potential to escalate into war” (10, 13, 25). However, the Colombia-Ecuador-Venezuela case may be an outlier with a far higher probability of violence than the other conflicts, due to the potent combination of long-standing territorial disputes, ideological cleavages, military deployments near the frontier, and potential for spillover from counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations, catalyzed by domestic political incentives and fueled by arms races funded by Venezuelan oil exports and Colombian receipts of US military aid (Mares, 9–10, 14, 44, 94–107, 170).

Second, what are the major causes and best indicators of foreign policy makers’ attention to one country or issue as opposed to others? Presidents spend time on domestic policy and politics as well as foreign policy, and US presidents spent much of the Cold War preoccupied with Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Whatever remaining slice of time a US president had for Latin America was surely not divided evenly among the American republics. However, the size of the US state apparatus and the extent of US influence as a superpower meant that the United States was almost constantly involved, at least a little bit, everywhere in the hemisphere, making the level of US attention hard to determine. These issues

5. Harmer (20–22) is more cautious about Chile’s significance to the Alliance for Progress; Haslam, however, argues that Chile was “the showcase” for the Alliance (*The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende’s Chile*, 12).

are particularly acute in the books' assessments of the Nixon administration's degree of attention to Latin America and to particular countries therein, relative to other priorities such as Vietnam, China, reelection, and Watergate. Loveman briefly claims that Latin America "mattered greatly" for Nixon and Henry Kissinger and that support for the overthrow of Allende was simply one piece of a larger pattern of encouraging military rule across the region (303). Similarly, Siekmeier argues that despite other priorities, the Nixon administration "did devote considerable time and concern to South American affairs"; however, the evidence presented for attention mostly involves ordering a few agency reports and contradicts Kissinger's public (and offensive) dismissals of Latin America's geopolitical status (121–125). Conversely, Crandall (110–113) notes that Nixon and his top advisors said little publicly about Latin America or even Brazil (which "fell into the background"), despite the fact that Nixon believed Brazil to be a pivotal country in the region, saw "eye to eye" with Brazil's government on most hemispheric issues, and got on quite well personally with President Emílio Médici. Harmer offers the most sustained analysis, with nuances that should provoke further research: Nixon "at least initially . . . did not regard the region as a US foreign policy priority" (39, 45–46); he gradually became obsessed with Chile, in particular, rather than the region as a whole (56–60) and leaned heavily on Brazil to take the lead in regional anticommunism (125–130, 147). By the time the Allende crisis peaked and a coup was nearly at hand, US leaders were distracted and indecisive, while policies were "fragmented" and "a messy reaction" to events on the ground (213, 229, 253).

Third, how can political scientists and historians researching inter-American relations make their work more useful and persuasive to one another? Diplomatic history and international relations may be natural allies because of their shared subject matter and their respective marginalization (at times) within their own disciplines, but engagement between the two camps has been erratic.⁶ Inter-American relations seems to be a healthy exception, with scholars regularly citing arguments and evidence on their topics from those outside their discipline (e.g., Siekmeier, 86–89; Crandall, 57–58); however, the field would benefit greatly if each side did more to consider the other's worldview. Specifically, historians might push themselves to articulate and sustain, if not causal theories of decision making, at least a clear image of the foreign policy process in which some factors consistently matter more than others. Harmer's analysis, admirably measured and comprehensive, might prove frustrating to political scientists when it seems that every conceivable factor—personality, ideology, domestic coalitions, commodity prices, foreign threats, misperceptions, and bureaucratic politics, among others—not only affected foreign policy but also interacted with and fed back into one another (6, 16, 108). From interviews and archives, Cuban intelligence operative (and Allende son-in-law) Luis Fernández Oña and Chilean ambassador in Washington (and subsequent Allende cabinet member) Orlando Letelier emerge as vibrant characters and at times astute observers of impending threats, while

6. See, e.g., Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

Allende remains a tragically fascinating enigma. For the purposes of explaining Chilean foreign policy, however, how much does any of this matter? To what extent is this a story about a particular regime ideology, or a particular position in the world economy, or particular vectors of foreign pressure? Alternatively, to what extent can some of the most critical decisions of the period be reduced to the personality, beliefs, and aspirations of Allende and his top advisors? Similarly, in Siekmeier's analysis of US policy toward Bolivia (and vice versa) prior to the 1952 revolution, it is not clear how much domestic political factors like the mobilization of subaltern actors and changing partisan coalitions, as opposed to global shifts (the Depression, World War II, changing tin prices, and the onset of the Cold War) or individual leadership changes, affected foreign policy (27–37). Siekmeier's portrayal (55–72) of Bolivian diplomat Víctor Andrade is one of the highlights of these books, but to what extent did Andrade's personal qualities (as opposed to other factors) truly affect policy outcomes?

Political scientists, on the other hand, could do more to articulate the slippage between their theoretical models and the evidence found in their case studies, to reflect on the limitations of their sources and the contributions of their new evidence relative to existing works, and to guard against reading prior events and documents uncritically through the lens of the present. Crandall cites the work of prominent historians, but it is not always clear where her argument fits into the historiography of US-Brazilian relations, and where her exploration of primary sources confirms or contradicts existing scholarship (though Crandall's chapter 5 is strongest in this regard). Because Crandall's thesis that shared interests (or "dual priorities") drive bilateral engagement and cooperation (2–6) ultimately depends on an assessment of what Brazil wants, historians might also question Crandall's choice (vii) to rely almost exclusively on US sources, since these might distort our understanding of central beliefs, goals, and concepts in Brazilian foreign policy, such as pragmatism, autonomy, development, and sovereignty (e.g., 8, 141, 183–184). Mares is dealing with contemporary conflicts, building on his previous work, and writing in part for a policy-oriented audience, so a fair critique from historians might not focus on the need to engage the deeper histories of these lingering disputes but rather might ask about the extent to which the assumptions of rationality that drive his model also influence his findings, and whether the sources Mares engages are consistent with some alternative readings. The variation across countries in public opinion regarding rival countries, disputed stakes, and the utility of armed force is particularly striking (chapter 3). Mares's emphasis throughout the book on the dangers of "rekindling nationalist passions" (10) might therefore be contingent on what nationalism (or some subtype of nationalism) meant to specific individuals in particular contexts, and whether these varying beliefs and passions are fully susceptible to a cost-benefit analysis of decision making (23, 37, 46–47, 55–57). Finally, in Loveman's volume, historians might express some discomfort with instances of anachronistic or presentist language (although it may be helpful for foreign policy analysts looking for comparable cases). For instance, it may be reasonable to see in East Florida in 1811 "what would now be called regime change" (28), but some other claims might invite questions about how the decision makers at the time defined and in-

terpreted these events and policies: for example, claims that “George Washington was a realist” (12); that “secret government, covert operations, and regime change had been established as national policy” by 1811 (26); or that a congressional plea for “the defense of women and children against ‘savages’ sounds as modern as effective rally-round-the-flag coalition-building” (32). Historians might also wonder why these decision makers expended so much effort in linking the use of force to moral and legal justifications if (as Loveman’s title suggests) they ultimately were subject to “no higher law.”

Finally, what are the sources and limits of Latin American agency in hemispheric affairs? Siekmeier chronicles Bolivia’s creative quest for leverage over the United States, its major source of foreign assistance, but can Bolivia really ever “opt out of the traditional patron-client relationship” (161, 81)? The *cocalero* base may wish to, but if even Evo Morales “has not questioned” the relationship with the United States, “in place since the nineteenth century” (Siekmeier, 178), will any Bolivian president? Conversely, attempts at provoking US attention, assistance, or acceptance by inflating common threats or flirting with outside powers (Siekmeier, 80, 95–8, 114; Mares, 35; Crandall, 52, 122; Harmer, 81–83, 116; Loveman, 157–161) seem fleetingly successful, at best, and fraught with risk. Brazil’s current extraregional partnerships (Crandall, 164–167) may represent an outlier, given Brazil’s economic clout and military modernization (Mares, 136–145; Loveman, 393). Loveman, though more focused on explaining US hegemonic aspirations and efforts than on evaluating their consequences in the target countries, provides an exhaustive and sobering litany of Latin American countries invaded or governments overthrown, from Mexico in the 1840s (67–73) to Panama in the 1980s (337–341). The coercive dynamics of hegemony and resistance, however, are more complex and more common than armed interventions. Although Mares and Loveman both note that the United States would likely participate in a regional war between Colombia and its neighbors, Mares also inquires about US ability to induce restraint among prospective belligerents, while Loveman warns of the intimidation that overseas US bases and the re-creation of the Navy’s Fourth Fleet might pose to Latin American leaders (Mares, 98, 130, 142, 149; Loveman, 381–382, 392–393).

These volumes clearly advance the state of knowledge on inter-American affairs and contribute to decentering foreign policy analysis. Individually, each book offers valuable portraits of frequently overlooked events, and each delivers an impressive punch of context and comparison. As a group, these works allow readers to reconstruct particular regional conflicts and political regime changes, particularly in South America during and after the Cold War, from a variety of national, theoretical, and evidentiary standpoints. Still, there is much more to be done in order to resolve concrete debates about attention and influence in specific historical cases, as well as broader questions about North American hegemony and Latin American agency. In particular, if the field of inter-American relations accepts the decentering move, then the causes of Latin American foreign policy decisions clearly require more research. A more balanced and reciprocal assessment of bilateral relationships is a good start, but scholars should move beyond the hub-and-spoke model of connections between Washington and various Latin

American capitals in order to explore triangular interactions (Harmer's volume is exemplary here). Such work might even suggest that, at times, Latin American policies toward the United States (and vice versa) may be epiphenomenal, mere by-products of their higher-priority interactions with their neighbors and with domestic opponents and allies. Future analyses of foreign policy making in a de-centered hemisphere should explore even further the complex politics of distraction and unintended consequences.