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Thomas C. Field, Jr. "Ideology as Strategy: Military-led Modernization and the Origins of the Alliance for Progress in Bolivia." *Diplomatic History* 36:1

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Contemporary scholarly examinations of John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress are surprisingly thin on the ground. This is a trend, moreover, that has been as true with respect to broad studies of the entire program as it has for more specific assessments of individual case studies. There is a difference between a field that is only partially developed, of course, and one that is barren: a number of important works relating to the Alliance are already in existence, while the article under review here suggests a number of ways that the extant literature can be further developed in accordance with emerging work on the history of development and on Latin America's place in the Global Cold War.¹ By providing a detailed examination of the Alliance's

¹ For existing studies on the Alliance and Kennedy's policies toward Latin America beyond Cuba, see Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area of the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Jeffrey Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University

implementation in Bolivia, Thomas Field significantly enriches our understanding of what remains a complex and thorny period in inter-American relations. Constructed upon rhetorical foundations characterised by noble ideals of development, democracy and social progress, the subsequent deterioration of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress into a morass of missed targets, worsening inter-American relations, and the support of a range of authoritarian regimes, has long puzzled scholars of U.S. policy in the region. Why did the Kennedy administration's benevolent intentions, scholars have typically asked, go awry as the Alliance failed to meet its grand goals?²

In his article, however, Field reverses this perennial line of enquiry. He suggests that the Alliance for Progress in Bolivia did not become authoritarian and supportive of militarism as it struggled to meet its original goals, but rather that these features were there "from the beginning." (153) Just as importantly, through his utilisation of Bolivian sources, Field depicts the full complexity of U.S.-Bolivian relations during this period—highlighting how the Kennedy administration's penchant for militarism married neatly with those groups in Bolivia who were willing to enact authoritarian policies, and also charting the impact that this had on leftist groups in Bolivia. This is starkly depicted in the episode surrounding the "Triangular Plan", a U.S.-Bolivian-West German agreement to provide funding to Bolivian mining interests in return for a crackdown on Communist-dominated mining unions. Once this had taken place, Field notes, "Washington did not delay in showing its gratitude for [President] Paz's decision to round up dozens of Bolivian leftists under the pretext of what the CIA conceded was a 'government fabricated coup.'" (166) Hence, authoritarianism and militarism, not democracy and liberal development, were at the heart of the Alliance for Progress as it was implemented in Bolivia during 1961.

of North Carolina Press, 2000); and *idem*, "Ideology, Social Science, and Destiny: Modernization and the Kennedy-era Alliance for Progress," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 22, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 199-229. For an outline of the shifting field with respect to development, see David Engerman and Corrinna Unger, "Towards a Global History of Modernization," *Diplomatic History* Volume 33, No. 3 (June 2009); and David Engerman, "The Anti-Politics of Inequality: Reflections on a Special Issue," *Journal of Global History*, Volume 6, No 1 (March 2011), 143-51. On Latin America's place in the Cold War, see Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser (eds), *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile & the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Gilbert Joseph and Greg Grandin (eds), *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² For a range of views, which focus respectively on geostrategic factors, political problems both at home and in Latin America, and on the constraining influence of an "ideology of modernization", see Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 199; Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, 29-46; and Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*.

The importance of such an argument—with respect to our understanding of Kennedy’s foreign policy, the history of U.S.-Latin American relations, and the history of development in U.S. policy—is self evident. Emphasising the perennial role of authoritarianism in the Alliance for Progress toward Bolivia challenges our conception of, first, what the Kennedy administration was seeking to achieve, and second, what priorities and ideas were driving their approach.³ At the same time, the article ensures that the Bolivian side of the story—both in high political terms and with respect to the role played by miners’ unions and individual workers—is an integral part of the narrative. It is within this part of the article, in fact, where arguably the most damaging aspect of the Alliance’s early actions in Bolivia can be seen. For in the telling of the deleterious influence that the coalition between the U.S. and the Paz Government (and even, at one point, a group of Canadian priests) had on local miners’ groups in the wake of the Triangular Plan, the collision between sweeping Cold War constructions and complex events on the ground that rarely fit into such simplistic frameworks is tragically clear.⁴ At one point, indeed, Field recounts a Catholic radio station in Bolivia demanding that “now is the time to put an end to Communism in Bolivia” and exhorting the women of that nation to “kill your children this moment if you are not capable of defending the Catholic religion!” (174)

As a result of a worsening situation in Bolivia, Field notes, the Kennedy administration strove in the fall of 1961 to tighten the relationship between the U.S. military and political and military elites in Latin America. At no point, he illustrates, did the Kennedy administration waver in its commitment to fostering authoritarian non-Communist regimes in Bolivia. Indeed, when President Victor Paz Estenssoro proved to be pursuing such goals with unsatisfactory vigor in 1963, U.S. officials and Bolivian Generals conspired to compel his compliance through a mixture of carrot and stick diplomacy. Thus the entrenched nature of authoritarianism within the Kennedy administration’s approach toward Bolivia—and, in particular, its presence from before the Alliance was launched—challenges us to rethink the accepted narrative of U.S. policy toward Latin America during this period. Most immediately, it compels us to consider in more detail the way that the Alliance was formed, what exactly it was intended to achieve, and the issue of whether similar patterns were evident elsewhere during the region. At the same time, though, it also raises a couple of points which, while not challenging the central thesis in any profound way, are nevertheless interesting enough to warrant further attention.

³ Such an approach fits in with emerging works on the role of development in US policy, see Nicole Sackley, “The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development, and the History of Rural Reconstruction,” *Journal of Global History*, Volume 6, No 3 (November 2011), 481-504; and Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁴ In this sense the article adds to the arguments, and answers some of the challenges, made in Engerman and Unger, “Towards a Global History of Modernization.”

First, there is the question of how characteristic the application of the Alliance in Bolivia was when compared to its implementation in other countries in the area. Toward the end of the article, Field notes that the “closer historians study President Kennedy’s foreign policy in individual countries, the more heavy handed it appears.” (182) This is an astute point and highlights the importance of scholars continuing to focus on particular case studies and particular countries.⁵ But at this point the argument does rather run into the age-old debate between specificity and breadth when it comes to analysing something like the Alliance for Progress. Though the case for authoritarianism and militarism being central in the Alliance’s implementation in Bolivia is clear from the evidence presented here, much less is done to suggest that this was typical in a regional sense. To be sure, there are some references to Kennedy’s support for military elites in other Latin American countries, while the administration’s increasing fixation on supporting pro-U.S. regimes irrespective of whether or not they were democratic is well established in the existing literature. Nevertheless, the author could have further developed still his views on this feature. During a panel at last year’s SHAFR Conference, Field noted, in reference to Jeff Taffet’s work, that there were, of course, “many Alliances for Progresses.”⁶ This was a very useful way of framing the issue, and it would have been beneficial to the present essay to expand this idea in more detail. Did the application of the Alliance in Bolivia simply foreshadow the way that the Alliance would develop elsewhere, for instance, or was it part of a broader trend from as early as 1961? Ensuring that the argument stayed tightly focused and coherent probably precluded the author from straying too far down this path. Even so, it would still have been useful to provide a clearer sense of where exactly Bolivia sits when it comes to the application of the Alliance more widely. Does Bolivia serve as an outlier, in other words, or is it in fact typical of the Alliance’s implementation elsewhere too?

Second, there appeared to be scope for a more detailed assessment of the Kennedy administration’s usage of emotive and alarmist rhetoric—both publicly and in internal correspondence—when it came to the situation in Bolivia. It has always struck me as slightly odd that Kennedy’s advisors, particularly Arthur Schlesinger, used such aggressive terminology to describe the dangers facing the U.S. in Latin America. The situation in the region had not altered all that profoundly by 1961 from that in evidence during the 1950s, yet some of the language used to describe the situation was far more sweeping and

⁵ For a recent discussion of this in the Latin American context, James Siekmeier, “Whither the Bilateral Study?: What the History of US Foreign Policy can tell us about the Emergent Multilateral World,” SHAFR Blog, December 10 2011, <http://www.shafr.org/2011/12/10/wh-ither-the-bilateral-study-what-of-the-history-of-u-s-foreign-policy-can-tell-us-about-the-emergent-multilateral-world/> (January 4 2012); Alan McPherson, “Forget the *Maine!*: The Legacy of the ‘United States and the Americas’ Series,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 35, No. 4 (September 2011), 709-28

⁶ Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*.

alarmist.⁷ To be sure, the U.S. seemed to face much greater problems than had hitherto been the case; but to describe these as urgent Cold War threats, as Schlesinger did in the aforementioned report when he described the Soviet Union as “hovering in the wings”, is nevertheless something of a leap.⁸ Consequently, I wonder whether the author could have been more interrogative of the administration’s apparent fixation on the Cold War. Much of the publicity surrounding the U.S. position in the region, after all, had arisen due to the public relations spectacle of Richard Nixon being spat upon by incensed Venezuelans in Caracas in 1958 and, a year later, the emergence of an increasingly anti-American government under Fidel Castro’s control in Cuba. Great political capital could have been accrued in the late 1950s/early 1960s, therefore, by highlighting the dangers then facing the U.S. in the region and chiding the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration’s mismanagement of inter-American relations. And once this began to happen, as per Michael Hunt’s definition of ideology in U.S. policy as a method of making a complex world more understandable, the language of the Cold War could have become an increasingly convenient way to frame the situation in the region.⁹

Such intellectual convenience, however, does not necessarily make something true. As a result, Field might have started to break-down the sweeping tone of U.S. assessments of Latin America (and, more specifically, Bolivia) and to gauge how firmly the Kennedy administration believed the situation to be one of prime Cold War urgency and how much, if at all, it was part of a view that it was necessary to dramatize the situation in order to ensure action was taken. Framing a problem as being of pressing Cold War importance was a well-worn way of providing the catalyst for sustained action and this remained the case as the Alliance was being formulated. As Walt Rostow told George Ball on March 1 1961, there was a need for those planning the Alliance to “dramatize this for the president.” Doing so, Rostow informed Ball, would “get the president off the hook for asking for lots of money.”¹⁰ Schlesinger himself, meanwhile, was cognisant of the

⁷ And this is true, it bears noting, despite the fact that the Eisenhower administration was hardly averse to describing all foreign policy problems in the developing world as being Cold War inflected. This was true in Latin America, too, although it was rarely as strident as that in evidence in Field’s description of the Kennedy administration’s approach. On the Eisenhower administration’s policies toward the area and the way they framed them, see Stephen Rabe, *Eisenhower: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism and Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Alan McPherson, *Yankee No!: Anti-Americanism in US-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁸ Report by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to President Kennedy, March 10 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963 Volume XII American Republics*, Doc No: 7.

⁹ Michael Hunt, “Ideology,” *Journal of American History*, Volume 77, No 1 (June 1990), 108-15.

¹⁰ Telephone Conversation between George Ball and Walt Rostow, March 1 1961, Latin America 1/23/61-8/16/63, Box 5, George W. Ball Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter JFKL).

need for the U.S. program in Latin America to be framed in a dramatic fashion. “This revolution [of global development and modernization] can be led by the U.S.,” he informed Richard Goodwin, “only if its domestic and hemispheric programs can fire the imagination of foreign nations.” Leadership in Africa and Asia, he argued, was contingent upon the U.S. achieving its goals in the Western Hemisphere; to do this, furthermore, would require a sustained commitment to a clear cause.¹¹

None of this, of course, fundamentally challenges Field’s depiction of “ideology as strategy” in the Kennedy administration’s thinking; the “apparent divide between ideology and strategy,” he notes toward the start of the essay, “is an illusion.” (152) National security considerations undoubtedly dominated the Kennedy administration’s perception of the situation in Bolivia when it took office and, in turn, shaped its view that development could (and should) take place for strategic purposes. As Field notes in citing Piero Gleijeses’s formulation: “the Communist threat was indeed midwife to the Alliance for Progress in Bolivia” (152). In the same way that it would have been useful to have framed the Bolivian case more firmly within its regional context, though, so it would have been helpful to start to unpick the Kennedy administration’s reflexive and alarmist use of Cold-War inflected terminology to describe the situation. Given the wider situation in the Cold War, and the growing influence of Fidel Castro in Latin America, Bolivia clearly posed significant problems for U.S. strategists, especially if the Alliance for Progress was going to succeed. A clearer sense of how this stance on Cold War issues married with the recognition of how the Alliance should be presented, however, could have added greater depth to this part of the argument.

In conclusion, Field’s article is a substantial contribution to our understanding of the Alliance for Progress in Latin America. Its depiction of a Kennedy administration firmly wedded to the benefits that authoritarianism and militarism could bring in Bolivia sheds substantial new light on the Alliance era. Perhaps most importantly, like all good scholarship, it provides a clear demonstration of how much work remains to be done before we fully understand the processes that underpinned the Alliance and the way that it worked when implemented in individual countries.

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¹¹ Memorandum from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Richard Goodwin, July 24 1961, Latin American Policy 1, Box 8, Richard Goodwin Papers, JFKL.