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Roundtable Review 15-43

William Michael Schmidli. *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781501765148 (hardcover, \$46.95).

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 Introduction by Eline van Ommen, University of Leeds

The reviews in this forum demonstrate that William Michael Schmidli's *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War* is an "impressive account," as Molly Avery puts it, of how human rights and democracy promotion shaped US foreign policy in the late Cold War, specifically towards revolutionary Nicaragua. The book "persuasively" shows, Theresa Keeley concludes, that the Reagan administration used the language of democracy promotion to fight the Cold War abroad, often with terrible consequences on the ground. Indeed, Jonathan Hunt notes, the book shows that the story of human rights and democracy promotion was "inextricably bound up in that of US interventionism" and national security interests. From the reviewers' comments, it is also clear that the book is not just relevant for scholars of US foreign policy, but also for historians of inter-American relations, the Cold War in Latin America, and human rights, which is an impressive accomplishment. It is certainly not the first time that Schmidli has made an important contribution to those fields, as both Hunt and Avery note. They consider *Freedom on the Offensive* to be the logical continuation of Schmidli's first pathbreaking monograph, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*, which details how human rights concerns informed Jimmy Carter's approach towards the Argentine dictatorship.¹

All of the reviewers, as well as the author in his response, engage with the question of the sincerity and/or hypocrisy of Reagan's commitment to human rights and democracy promotion. Hunt, for instance, wonders how representative Nicaragua is for Schmidli's claim that democracy promotion, for Reagan and his allies, was "more a fig leaf than a crusade." After all, Hunt points out, US foreign policy towards revolutionary Nicaragua, which maintained close relationships with Cuba, Libya, and the Soviet Union, was "unique." Similarly, Keeley wonders if Reagan was just looking for more support for his foreign policy towards Central America, or whether he "fundamentally believe that democracy promotion was the core of human rights?" For Avery, who focuses mostly on the Latin American side of Schmidli's book, the answer is clear. Reagan's turn to democracy promotion, she writes, did not grow out of a "moral conviction" but instead from "more cynical priorities" related to Cold War containment. Indeed, for Avery, *Freedom on the Offensive* is a perfect example of the "hollowness" of the Reagan administration's insistence that it fought for democracy and human rights, and she praises the clear way in which Schmidli discusses the "countless human rights abuses" that the US-backed Contras committed in the 1980s. Schmidli, in his response, writes that "both sincerity and hypocrisy were evident in Reagan's human rights policy." The Reagan administration had a narrow definition of human rights, which excluded social and economic rights and instead emphasized political rights, elections, and civil liberties. And even within that narrow definition, when push came to shove, the Reagan administration prioritized Cold War concerns over a genuine commitment to democracy. The United States, Schmidli writes, "supported democratization as long as US-backed candidates won."

The reviews also highlight Schmidli's innovative methodology, as he draws on sources from the United States and Central America, including oral history transcripts, government papers, and private archives. Notably, the book's narrative includes both state and non-state actors, such as congresspersons, solidarity activists, and officials from the US Department of State and the National Endowment for Democracy. This "multi-level approach," Hunt concludes, ensures that Schmidli offers his readers a nuanced account of the "social and cultural drivers of US foreign policy." The book's ambitious scope, combined with the welcome inclusion of multiple perspectives, comes with some challenges, most notably regarding the book's structure. While admitting that it is "difficult to imagine a better structure," both Avery and Hunt note "some repetition" and "narrative oscillations" in the book, with some characters and concepts introduced multiple times. At the same time, Avery points out, this makes it an "accessible book for teaching."

¹ William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

In sum, *Freedom on the Offensive* is an important book that undoubtedly will lead to more discussion and historical research into the origins and impact of Reagan's efforts to promote what he perceived to be democracy and human rights abroad. In a broader sense, the book also sets the stage for a much-needed historiographical discussion about the end of the Cold War, not just in the West but specifically in the Global South. What, if anything, did the US "victory" in the Cold War mean for those living in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East?

Contributors:

William Michael Schmidli is a member of the Institute for History at Leiden University. A US foreign relations historian, Schmidli's research focuses on the evolving significance of human rights, democracy promotion, and transnational advocacy networks from the Cold War to the present. He is the author of *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Cornell University Press, 2013), which was listed as one of the best books of the year by *Foreign Affairs* magazine, and *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022), which won the William M. LeoGrande Award for the best book on US-Latin American relations. Schmidli has received research fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies.

Eline van Ommen is a Lecturer in Contemporary History at the University of Leeds, specializing in revolutions, transnational activism, and the Cold War in Latin America. She published her first book, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War*, with the University of California Press in 2024. She is the co-editor of a special issue on the international dimensions of the Nicaraguan Revolution for the journal *The Americas*, published in 2021. Eline completed her PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 2020, and her thesis was awarded the BIHG Michael Dockrill International History Thesis prize.

Molly Avery is Lecturer in the History of the Americas at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on the history of Latin America's Cold War, with a particular focus on Pinochet's Chile, anticommunist internationalism and dictatorship. She is currently working on her first book, *The Anticommunist International: Networks of Terror in Cold War Latin America*, which argues that the Chilean and Argentine military dictatorships played a vital—and understudied—role in the conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador between 1977 and 1984. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Latin American Studies* and *The Americas*.

Jonathan R. Hunt is an Assistant Professor in the Strategic and Operational Research Department at the US Naval War College. He is the author of *The Nuclear Club: How America and the World Policed the Atom from Hiroshima to Vietnam* (Stanford University Press, 2022) and with Simon Miles co-edited *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

Theresa Keeley is an Associate Professor of US and the World at the University of Louisville. Her first book, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), won the 2020 Juan E. Méndez Award and the 2021 John Gilmary Shea Prize. Her work has appeared in publications including *Diplomatic History*, *Gender & History*, *U.S. Catholic History*, and the *Washington Post*. Her current project examines how doctors and activists used medical aid to children to challenge US foreign policy on moral and religious grounds. Before entering academia, she was a human rights activist and attorney.

Review by Molly Avery, University of Sheffield

Michael Schmidli's *Freedom on the Offensive* is an impressive account of how human rights and democracy promotion shaped US foreign policy in the late Cold War. While Schmidli's overall argument addresses the development of US foreign policy in broad terms, the case study at the heart of the book—US policy toward revolutionary Nicaragua during the 1980s—reflects Schmidli's background as a historian of inter-American relations. Indeed, this book is in many ways a natural outgrowth from Schmidli's first monograph, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*, which examined President Jimmy Carter's human rights policy in Argentina in the late 1970s.¹ In *Freedom on the Offensive*, Schmidli adopts a wider lens, locating his analysis of the Reagan administration's human rights and democracy promotion policies within the wider history of human rights in US foreign policy, ranging from the collapse of the bipartisan Cold War consensus in the late 1960s through the Nixon, Ford, and Carter presidencies. At the same time, Schmidli looks beyond the end of the 1980s, evaluating precisely how the Reagan turn toward democracy promotion shaped the post-Cold War world. Crucially, throughout the book, Schmidli takes the Reagan administration's utilization of the language of democracy and human rights with a pinch of salt, and his exploration of US policy toward revolutionary Nicaragua in the 1980s reveals the devastating impact that this so-called human rights policy had in human terms. This clear-eyed approach to the true intentions and priorities behind President Ronald Reagan's foreign policy is one of the great strengths of this book.

Schmidli draws on a broad range of sources in English and Spanish that include government documents, private papers, media publications, and a range of oral history transcripts. This diverse source base allows Schmidli to examine both the intricacies of US foreign policymaking and the complex interplay between state and non-state actors, particularly when it came to the making of US policy in Central America. And indeed, this is a book that is nothing if not ambitious in scope. In the introduction, Schmidli lays out three central questions that he seeks to answer. First, "How did the breakdown of the bipartisan Cold War consensus in the late 1960s shape the emergence and evolution of human rights in US foreign policy in the 1970s and 1980s?"; second, "How did the Reagan administration's confrontation with revolutionary Nicaragua illuminate a defining struggle over the contours of US foreign policy?"; and third, "How did Reagan's emphasis on democracy promotion set the stage for the United States' unique engagement with human rights in the post-Cold War era?"(7).

In asking these questions Schmidli sets himself a difficult task, not least in the practical sense of how to structure a book that seeks to integrate the story of one episode in US foreign policy—intervention in Nicaragua in the 1980s—with a much broader analysis of how questions of human rights and democracy promotion shaped US engagement with the world in the final decades of the Cold War and beyond. Schmidli tackles this conundrum by dividing the book into seven chapters, each of which addresses the topic of democracy promotion from a different angle. While these chapters are arranged broadly chronologically (with the first covering 1968–1980 and the seventh 1987–1990), there is considerable overlap between them, with chapters 5 (on right-wing transnational activism and public diplomacy) and six (US solidarity activism with Nicaragua) both covering the 1981–1990 period in its entirety. As a result, there is some repetition, with some key terms and individuals discussed almost identically in different places (for instance, the discussion of Jeane Kirkpatrick, US Ambassador to the United Nations in chapters one and two or the discussion of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO] in chapters 4 and 6). Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine a better structure, and the ample context provided in each chapter makes this an accessible book for teaching. Many of the chapters would work well as stand-alone readings.

¹ William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

As stated, this is a wide-ranging book that will be of great interest to both historians of US foreign relations and those who study the Cold War in Latin America. While the book contains a great wealth of detail on the evolving US political landscape in the late Cold War, in the interests of space, I focus in this review on the parts that relate most directly to my own expertise as a historian of Latin America. In this respect, one of the key strengths of this book lies in the way in which Schmidli places events in Nicaragua—and Central America—front and centre in the development of Reagan’s foreign policy, and particularly the administration’s shift toward democracy promotion. As Kirkpatrick put it in March 1981, Central America was “quite simply the most important place in the world for the United States” (53). And within Central America, Nicaragua assumed critical importance. As Schmidli notes in chapter 3, “over the course of two terms in the Oval Office, the president would devote more speeches to Nicaragua than any other single topic” (76). Given this statistic, it is astounding that there still remain significant gaps in our understanding of the international history of the Nicaraguan Revolution and its significance for the final decade of the Cold War. While forthcoming books from Eline van Ommen and Mateo Jarquín promise to greatly enrich our understanding of this period, *Freedom on the Offensive* makes its own contribution, offering rich detail on the history of the revolution.²

From its very outset, the Reagan administration justified its aggressive policy toward Nicaragua in terms of the supposed Communist threat posed by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* - FSLN) regime. In Reagan’s own words, the FSLN were simply “a set of autocratic rulers” who were “helping Cuba and the Soviets destabilize our hemisphere” (102). In chapter 3, Schmidli challenges this narrative by offering a history of the Nicaraguan Revolution told from the perspective of those who were actually involved. This is a very welcome addition, and allows Schmidli to explore how Nicaraguans themselves sought to define the revolutionary project, and particularly how the Sandinistas set out their own conception of human rights, wherein “authentic democracy and economic and social justice were inextricably linked” (90). In doing so, Schmidli points out the exaggerations in US depictions of the revolutionary government as a Communist beachhead in Central America—“the trickle of arms to Salvadoran revolutionaries was the exception, not the rule, in Sandinista foreign policy” (91)—and offers a much more nuanced explanation for the motives behind US aggression toward Sandinista Nicaragua, one which is fundamentally rooted in the late-Cold War struggle to define both “human rights” and “democracy.”

From the perspective of Sandinista leaders, “it was the FSLN’s determination to serve as a model for national liberation...not its purported Communist ties—that accounted for Washington’s singular aggression” (105). In effect, “the Sandinistas viewed Washington’s aggression as an assault on their effort to create an authentic democracy rooted in social and economic justice” (105-106). So, while the FSLN regime was certainly Marxist, the threat it posed to Washington stemmed not from its ties to the wider Communist international, but rather its deeply anti-imperialist stance and alternative model of popular democracy. Reading this part of the book made me think of the parallels between US aggression toward Sandinista Nicaragua and the US policy towards Allende’s Chile a decade earlier: while emerging from vastly different contexts (one democratic, the other through armed struggle), in both cases Marxist governments explicitly sought to challenge US definitions of “democracy,” re-orient national economies away from the United States, and carry out substantial social and economic reforms, attracting Washington’s ire in the process.³

² Eline van Ommen, *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023); Mateo Jarquín *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

³ On US relations with Allende’s Chile, see Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

In this respect, then, democracy promotion must be understood as part and parcel of the longer US Cold War strategy of containment. And in probing the true intentions behind US foreign policymaking in the 1980s, *Freedom on the Offensive* joins other recent work that contests the still-widespread perception that the Reagan administration's turn to democracy promotion grew out of a moral conviction in favour of democracy and human rights, rather than more cynical political priorities.⁴ It is nonetheless still depressingly common to find both academic and journalistic writing that uncritically celebrates the Reagan administration's contribution to the third wave of democratisation. As one recent article in the *Washington Post's* "Made by History" series put it: Reagan's policies "played a key role in encouraging and buttressing that wave, providing a playbook for helping reverse the anti-democratic trend today."⁵ Yet accounts such as these all too often draw selectively on case studies that reflect well on the United States—such as support for the Chilean democratic opposition in the 1988 plebiscite that brought an end to the Pinochet dictatorship—and assiduously downplay or avoid all mention of incidents where US support for so-called "democratic freedom fighters" led to a severe escalation in violence and human rights abuses, with Nicaragua the case in point.⁶

In *Freedom on the Offensive*, by contrast, Schmidli presents an exhaustive account of the hollowness of the Reagan administration's claims to respect either democracy or human rights when it came to Nicaragua. In its bilateral relations with the FSLN government, the Reagan administration repeatedly engaged in bad faith and fundamentally performative negotiation, making assurances of the US commitment to high-level diplomatic talks with the FSLN purely as "a necessary sop to Congress in the effort to convince congressional moderates to support *Contra* funding" (134). Indeed, Schmidli's comparison of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran elections of 1984—taking place just months apart—reveals the Reagan administration's very flexible definition of "democracy" when it came to Central America. In Nicaragua, the election was "scrutinized by more than six hundred journalists and four hundred international electoral observers" and yet was still denounced as "phony" by President Reagan (138). In El Salvador, where, in the words of a journalist quoted by Schmidli, "any left-wing candidate foolhardy enough to run... would probably have been assassinated" (138), the Reagan administration celebrated the 1984 elections as a great triumph for democracy. This comparison between Nicaragua and El Salvador is a fruitful one, and in drawing out these double standards at the heart of the democracy promotion policy, Schmidli ably demonstrates how Cold War imperatives shaped the application of the policy on a country-by-country basis.

Perhaps more importantly, Schmidli does not shy from describing, in detail, how the US-supported *Contras* committed countless human rights abuses throughout the 1980s, including the wanton destruction of coffee cooperatives and the torture and murder of their members (134-35); the rape and massacre of civilians—including children—across the country (110-111); and indiscriminate attacks on the teachers and health services central to the Sandinistas' ambitious reform programme (212-213). Moreover, Schmidli shows how incidents such as these were widely publicised, thanks to both Sandinista efforts to draw attention to the atrocities being committed on Nicaraguan soil and to the tireless work of many US human rights organisations and solidarity activists, which are explored in chapter 6. Yet the Reagan White House successfully drowned out these accounts with its own public diplomacy machine, which was staffed by an array of figures from across the political right, and which is detailed at length in chapter 5. In exploring this

⁴ See, for instance, Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵ William Inboden, "Ronald Reagan Offers Hope that We Can Reverse the Decline of Democracy," *The Washington Post*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2022/12/06/democratic-decline-reagan/> [accessed 30 March 2023].

⁶ Hal Brands, for instance, goes some way to acknowledge the enormous human cost of US intervention in the name of "democracy" in both El Salvador and Nicaragua but appears to deem these widespread human rights abuses acceptable collateral damage in the name of "advancing democratic revolution." Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 142.

struggle to define how the *Contra* war was understood in the US public sphere—a struggle which the Reagan administration largely won - Schmidli shows how this rhetorical emphasis on democracy and human rights proved effective in rebuilding the bipartisan Cold War consensus in Washington, even while the results of US policy on the ground in Nicaragua painted a very different picture.

If one key function of the policy of democracy promotion lay in how US Cold War interventionism could be justified at home, in *Freedom on the Offensive* Schmidli also makes a crucial argument about the policy's wider significance in shaping the normative definitions of “human rights” and “democracy” at the end of the Cold War. In this respect the book is a vital contribution to the overlapping—and still emerging—historiographical fields examining the end of the Cold War and the third wave of democratization in Latin America.⁷ While this is ultimately a book about US foreign policy, Schmidli is attentive to the way Latin Americans—and events in Latin America—shaped that policy. And indeed, in *Freedom on the Offensive*, Schmidli argues that the US response to the third wave of democratization was at first reactive, and then subsequently driven by a desire to shape its outcomes and ensure that it served US geopolitical interests. As Schmidli puts it in the final chapter,

as military leaders vacated presidential palaces across the region [over the course of the 1980s], for US policymakers allowing an opening for leftists to take power—whether by revolution or reform—was never on the cards. While lauding the wave of democratization sweeping the hemisphere, American officials sought to replace dictatorial US clients with elected moderates who would fall in line with US interests (203).

While emerging from a different context, Violeta Chamorro, leader of the UNO (*Unión Nacional Opositora*, National Opposition Union) coalition that defeated the FSLN in the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, fit the bill of “elected moderate,” and was welcomed with open arms by President George H. W. Bush and immediately rewarded with a hefty aid package (226-227). Thus, where the policy of democracy promotion was conceived of in a Cold War context, in the tumult of the late 1980s it transformed into a means to seek to control and shape the constitutional settlements that emerged from the third wave. In essence, having used democracy promotion to rebuild a bipartisan consensus in the first half of the 1980s, in the second half of that decade and beyond, the Reagan administration shaped how both “democracy” and “human rights” would come to be defined into the post-Cold War world.

In his conclusion, Schmidli pushes this argument a little further, reflecting on the far-reaching consequences of US democracy promotion at the close of the Cold War. Here, Schmidli argues that the FSLN's defeat in 1990 “underscored the importance of the Reagan administration's democracy promotion initiative in the failure of the broader third-world project” (230), marking not only an electoral loss but the defeat of the alternative conception of social and economic human rights that lay at the core of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Once again, this made me think of Chile—a case Schmidli touches upon throughout the book and discusses in detail in chapter 7—and particularly Alison Bruey's work on the form that democratisation took there (1988-90). In her book, Bruey describes how the popular resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship that exploded in the 1980s centred around “an end to dictatorship and the neoliberal economic model and in

⁷ While both topics have been amply explored by political scientists, there are still few histories examining the third wave of democratization and the end of the Cold War in Latin America in great detail. Nonetheless, Vanni Pettinà offers a synthesis in the epilogue to *Historia mínima de la Guerra Fría en América Latina* (Ciudad de México, México: El Colegio de México, 2018), recently published in English translation as *A Compact History of Latin America's Cold War*, trans. Quentin Pope (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022). For an example of country-level analysis, see Victor Figueroa Clark, “Nicaragua, Chile and the End of the Cold War in Latin America,” in *The End of the Cold War in the Third World: New Perspectives on Regional Conflict*, ed. Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Sergei Radchenko (London: Routledge, 2011), 192-207.

favor of democracy and a more equitable economic system.”⁸ And yet the 1990 arrival of the *Concertación* (the coalition of centre-left opposition parties formed in 1988) in government, which was warmly welcomed by the United States, produced a different outcome. Chile’s new democracy was characterised by “the continuance of the neoliberal model” and a “narrow working definition of human rights” which “clashed with understandings of rights and visions of society constructed in grassroots opposition circles” in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹

For me, the greatest contribution of *Freedom on the Offensive* is the way it so clinically demonstrates how deliberately the US government—under Reagan, Bush senior, and beyond—sought to redefine both “human rights” and “democracy” to serve US geopolitical interests and stymie the emergence of alternative visions of democracy, rights, and socioeconomic development, since they supposedly threatened “the very foundations of the US hegemonic project” (231). Needless to say, for Latin America, this aspect of the US victory in the Cold War has fundamentally defined the post-Cold War constitutional settlements across the entire region, with the legacies of the third wave of democratisation being very present in contemporary politics. I look forward to seeing how other historians build on the foundation Schmidli has laid in this book to better understand precisely how the ideological struggle over democracy and human rights in the late Cold War continues to shape our world today.

⁸ Alison Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty: Grassroots Activism and Human Rights in Pinochet’s Chile* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 13.

⁹ Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*, 19.

 Review by Jonathan R. Hunt, US Naval War College

Who is democracy for? While etymology is an imperfect exercise when writing about history, it can nonetheless be illuminating. The Greek roots, *demos*—the full citizenry of a state—and *kratos*—the power to rule—point to three features. First, *demos* implies a kind of universal franchise, that is to say, political equality among citizens and the erasure of distinctions between rulers and the ruled. Second, even as it promotes civil universality, democracy implies a level of self-determination, reinforcing civic pride or nationalism (or both) within a political community while accentuating differences with others. Third, “the people” become the benchmark of governance: as an object of policy and the source of representatives, voters, and legitimacy. In short, democracy involves the participation of citizens in their own governance, even as it gives rise to important, subsidiary questions about who counts as a citizen—and who does not—and the particular channels through which the people’s power is directed and, at times, contained.

In *Freedom on the Offensive*, William Michael Schmidli argues that the banner of democracy became a battering ram for US national security interests during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, when the consensus over US interventionism that had been broken by Vietnam was reformed under the standard of human rights. The relationship between human rights and US-Latin American policy is not a new subject for Schmidli. His first book, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*, is a pioneering study of how the rise of moral warrants in US foreign policy led the presidential administration of Jimmy Carter to question increasingly tyrannical and murderous US allies in the Argentinian military junta.¹ In many ways, *Freedom on the Offensive* picks up where *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* left off: the transition from Carter to Reagan in January 1981. Although internal and external opposition to human rights issues amid the “second Cold War” had already brought an end to Carter’s efforts to punish Buenos Aires’s state-sponsored terrorism, Reagan’s outspoken anti-Communism boded badly for values-based US diplomacy following his inaugural remarks from the Capitol’s west portico on 20 January 1981.

The core intervention of *Freedom on the Offensive* is that in US political culture, democracy promotion displaced peace and solidarity activism on the Left while reinvigorating overweening interventionism on the Right. Schmidli attributes this recrudescence of US moralized might not only to the New Right and the Republican Party (although both figure prominently), but also to centrists, liberals, and US political elites more generally. His heroes are those who put their lives on the line to disrupt Reagan’s covert war against the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan people, who US-directed black operations had so often victimized. To this end, he frequently places mid-level actors—social activists from across the political spectrum, congresspersons, non-Cabinet officials in the US Department of State, and the National Endowment for Democracy—in the narrative foreground. This multi-level approach lends his analysis of US-Nicaraguan relations considerable nuance. Where a historian more narrowly concerned with high-level decision-making might draw starker lines between Carter’s moralism and Reagan’s anti-Communism—or expend more ink on well-travelled subjects such as the Iran-Contra affair—Schmidli’s attention to the social and cultural drivers of US foreign policy furnishes a fuller account of how US armed might would become increasingly sheathed in the enlightened symbology of inalienable rights.

Such an “intermestic” approach yields dividends.² *Freedom on the Offensive* is structured chrono-thematically, with the first and second chapters covering the rise of human rights in US foreign relations from Richard Nixon to Carter and Reagan’s presidential volte-face, respectively. Chapter 3 traces the arc of US-Nicaraguan relations amid the “second” Cold War, from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the end of the first Reagan

¹ William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

² Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*, 5.

administration. In line with Jennifer Miller’s innovative work on the “antidemocratic democracy” that US administrators enforced in occupied Japan, where the electoral process was valued over political pluralism (with left-leaning parties, guilty by association with international Communism, marginalized),³ Schmidli elaborates on how Washington emphasized political and civil rights to the detriment of economic or social ones. In short, the right to vote, to a free press, to free speech, to free association, to criminal justice, etc., crowded out those related to employment, housing, food, healthcare, social justice, and peace-making more generally, especially in parts of the world beset by poverty and civil conflict. Sandinista strongman Daniel Ortega captured this dilemma in a 1984 campaign speech: “They say we’re anti-democratic, but we know what real democracy means. Democracy is literacy, democracy is land reform, democracy is education and public health!”⁴

The book then shifts gears to examine the era of the *Contra* war from a variety of standpoints. The fourth chapter reviews the rise of “democracy promotion” in the US Department of State, the White House, and the new-minted National Endowment for Democracy. The fifth weaves stories of individuals such as Jack Wheeler, an arch-conservative adventurer and champion of “freedom fighters” battling Communism in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, and Central America. The sixth offers countervailing portraits—tales of the American solidarity activists who picketed the White House, investigated covert operations, and supported the Sandinistas in the name of justice and peace. The story of Brian Willson, a Vietnam vet who lost his legs blocking a train carrying military supplies near a Naval Weapons Station in California is as harrowing as it is poignant, illustrating how dissimilar (and perilous) peace work was by standing athwart state power. The narrative then resumes a chronological flow, charting how democracy promotion offered a tonic to those who were unsure about the purpose of US global leadership as the Soviet collapse robbed officials in Washington of the devils they knew in Moscow. While the chrono-thematic structure gives rise to narrative oscillations and repetitions, it has the virtue of focusing the spotlight on differing lead actors as the drama moves through its various acts.

With its attention to how private and public actors wielded lofty ideals for ulterior purposes, *Freedom on the Offensive* serves its readers a prehistory of George W. Bush’s “freedom agenda” and, more generally, the pitched battlefield on which US foreign intervention has been waged since 1981. On these terms, it is mostly compelling, furnishing an indispensable link in the chain of events and movements that has sustained an increasingly overweening US role in the world. As the author of a book on the history of nuclear nonproliferation, I would quibble with whether democracy promotion should be credited as a cause rather than as a *post facto* rationalization when it came to George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq.⁵ After all, Secretary of State Colin Powell’s infamous address to the United Nations Security Council dwelt on evidence that Saddam Hussein continued to pursue weapons of mass destruction, with his alleged “violations of human rights” mentioned only once, toward the end, in support of Powell’s claim that moral scruples would not prevent the Iraqi dictator from using chemical, biological, or nuclear munitions.

The case for Nicaragua in the 1980s is stronger. Schmidli asserts that “the Reagan administration’s embrace of democracy promotion was an attempt to adjust US diplomatic rigging to changing political headwinds,” even as it “offered little in the way of concrete assistance to the hemisphere’s fledgling democracies” (125). What matters for him is not that the Reagan administration felt itself pressured to make accommodations

³ Jennifer Miller, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁴ Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: Putnam, 1991), 246.

⁵ “U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell Addresses the U.N. Security Council,” The White House, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030205-1.html> (accessed 6 July 2023); Jonathan R. Hunt, *The Nuclear Club: How America and the World Policed the Atom from Hiroshima to Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

with regnant human rights discourse, but how it wrapped US intervention in the star-spangled bunting of free citizens, free press, and free elections. Navigating a political realm upended by the Vietnam War and domestic culture wars, “the White House advanced a human rights policy that was infused with American exceptionalism and served to justify aggressive US Cold War policies” (41).

The peculiarities of the Nicaraguan case do raise questions about representativeness, context, and significance that bear on Schmidli’s claim that for Reagan and his ilk, democracy was more fig leaf than crusade. As Francis Fukuyama observed in *The End of History*, among “democratic transitions in Southern Europe, Latin America, and South Africa” from 1979 to 1988, Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s overthrow was the only violent one.⁶ Washington’s response was also unique. A century of US meddling in Central America dating back to William Walker, who had tried to carve out slave-holding colonies there in the 1850s, inclined Nicaraguans to distrust the northern colossus. Then there was the material aid that Cuba, North Korea, Libya, and the Soviet Union were furnishing the Sandinistas, whose collectivization of agriculture, general economic mismanagement, and intolerance of dissent harmed Nicaragua’s economy and their own legitimacy. How generalizable, then, should historians treat US democracy promotion toward Nicaragua—a case where the Iran-Contra fiasco proved that the commander-in-chief was willing to flout the domestic rule of law? How did this case compare to others where the Reagan administration positioned itself on the side of voters: Chile, Argentina, South Africa (haltingly), South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Poland, and the Soviet Union? While Poland and the Soviet Union *prima facie* fit Schmidli’s interpretation, alternative explanations may be more persuasive relative to Chile, Argentina, South Africa, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, either as cases where Americans recoiled from the use of torture, racial segregation, and political assassination by US allies, or US elites’ preference for stable investment destinations as the Cold War petered out. By the same token, how successful was Reagan’s embrace of democracy promotion relative to Nicaragua in “re-creating the foreign policy bipartisanship of the early Cold War” when Iran-Contra—arguably the greatest constitutional crisis in US history save the Civil War and Watergate—is taken into account?

Focusing on the United States also has the unfortunate effect of downplaying democracy promoters from elsewhere. Non-violent political opposition in Nicaragua, while, by definition, anti-Sandinista, was politically and morally distinct from that of the Contras. The presidential opponent of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega in 1990, Violeta Chamorro, was the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, whom the Somoza dictatorship had murdered in response to scathing coverage in his newspaper, *La Prensa*. Violeta, who ran on a united front ticket, had herself been selected for the post-revolution junta in 1979, only to resign in protest against the Sandinistas’ monopolization of power. *La Prensa* was not just one among many “anti-Sandinista civic organizations;” it published freely in the face of regular censorship and sanctions. At one point, Interior Minister Tomás Borges shut down its presses for 451 days (140). While framing the narrative around the United States rightly emphasizes the trade embargo that strangled Nicaragua’s economy, US officials were not alone in espousing electoral democracy. Among those who attempted to mediate the earlier 1984 election were Colombian President Belisario Betancur, former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, Norwegian Defense Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg, and former West Germany Chancellor and Social Democratic Party leader Willy Brandt, whom Stephen Kinzer of the *New York Times* once described as “a longtime friend of the Sandinistas.”⁷ Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez, who expelled the CIA-backed *Contras* from his country and flouted US Secretary of State George Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams in pursuing a peace deal between the *Contras* and the Sandinistas, consistently pursued elections and criticized the Sandinista regime’s high-handedness. “I would like to see [the Sandinistas] change,” he shared at the time, “to evolve to the point where they would permit a more open, pluralist system, be tolerant, and keep the

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Perennial, 1992), 21.

⁷ Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, 244.

promises they made to the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1979. But reality tells me something else. With the passage of time, the regime has become less pluralist, less tolerant. It's all very sad.”⁸ His peacemaking won Arias Sánchez the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize.

If anything, the growing support for electoral democracy in Central America and around the globe strengthens Schmidli's case by casting Reagan's obstructionism in an even more unflattering light. Among other matters, the Central American Peace Accords which Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua signed in 1987 required signatories to uphold “an authentic pluralist and participatory democratic process,” including “full freedom for political parties and full press freedom, and to hold periodic elections monitored by the United Nations and the Organization of American States.”⁹ Central American peace diplomacy, in conjunction with democracy promotion, ended the *Contra* War and ushered in free and fair elections in 1990. That the Reagan administration repeatedly worked to sabotage the peace plan demonstrated how hollow its claims to promote Nicaraguan democracy truly were.

The Sandinistas merit praise for respecting the peaceful transfer of power in 1990. Ortega sweetened his loss by confiscating large estates for him and his inner circle. His subsequent actions have not validated his credentials as a democrat. Chamorro served as Nicaragua's president from 1990 to 1997. Ten years later, Ortega returned to power. He remains there today, having, per *Human Rights Watch*, “aggressively dismantled all institutional checks on presidential power.”¹⁰ No longer a man of the Left, he cracked down on anti-government protests ahead of the 2021 election, imprisoning hundreds of political foes, including Juan Lorenzo Holmann Chamorro, the general manager of *La Prensa*; Arturo Cruz, Jr., an Oxford-trained historian and the son of Arturo Cruz (who withdrew from the 1984 election at the behest of Reagan's CIA); and Cristiana Chamorro Barrios, Ortega's chief rival in the 2021 presidential election, much as her mother Violeta had been before.

Freedom on the Offensive demonstrates that the story of democracy promotion in the 1980s was inextricably bound up in that of US interventionism. The questions that remain are when and under what conditions does the promotion of free and fair elections, all else being equal, cause more good than harm?

⁸ Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, 346.

⁹ Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, 347.

¹⁰ “Nicaragua: Events of 2018,” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/nicaragua> (accessed 31 May 2023).

Review by Theresa Keeley, University of Louisville

In *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and US Interventionism in the Late Cold War*, William Michael Schmidli argues that although President Ronald Reagan's conception of human rights included anti-Communism and neoliberal economic policies, the core was democracy promotion. The White House turned to this approach to gain congressional support and defuse the complaints of human rights advocates. Schmidli analyzes Reagan's efforts by investigating US policy toward Nicaragua. By 1986, Schmidli contends, Reagan's democracy promotion "had made significant steps toward recreating the bipartisan Cold War consensus between the executive and legislative branches that had foundered in the late 1960s on the shoals of the Vietnam War" (4).

Schmidli is not the first to focus on Reagan, human rights, and Nicaragua, but *Freedom on the Offensive* differs from other scholarship by pairing together human rights and democracy promotion through the lens of US policy toward Nicaragua. Other scholars have examined human rights activism during the Reagan presidency, how human rights influenced Reagan's foreign policy and shaped executive-legislative relations, and US-Nicaragua relations more broadly.¹ Schmidli contends that democracy was the dominant feature of Reagan's human rights policy—not, for example, religious freedom.

Schmidli shows how Reagan came to adopt democracy promotion as the centerpiece of human rights. He discusses critics of US foreign policy in the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly the liberal internationalists and liberal cold warriors, and discusses how President Jimmy Carter's stress on human rights broke from the realpolitik of prior administrations. But Carter deemphasized human rights during his final two years in office, and his administration "failed to create a domestic political consensus around its foreign policy priorities" (29). Reagan rejected Carter's emphasis on human rights. His administration forged a different path, known as the Kirkpatrick Doctrine, after Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations. The approach regarded communist interventionism, not social and economic inequality, as causing social unrest and revolution. For US policy toward Central America, this meant support for the Salvadoran government and moves to destabilize the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. But the Senate rejection of the nomination of Ernest Lefever as assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs in May 1981 was a wake-up call. Lefever had pushed for the abolition of the State Department's Human Rights Bureau. Realizing its approach to human rights would not earn it congressional support, the Reagan administration pursued a new course.

Schmidli then traces how Reagan's proposal to promote democracy evolved. In a 1982 speech at Westminster, Reagan explained his idea: "The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means" (115). Reagan's conception of human rights and democracy was both specific and narrow. There was no priority on social and economic rights. Democracy meant "regular elections, the protection of civil liberties, and a free market economy protecting the interests of corporate capitalism" (4). The following

¹ For examples, see: Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Lauren F. Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Theresa Keeley, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflicts Over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Robert Brier, *Poland's Solidarity Movement and the Global Politics of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, *Reagan, Congress, & Human Rights: Contesting Morality in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); David Johnson Lee, *The Ends of Modernization: Nicaragua and the United States in the Cold War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

year, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was created. The “bipartisan, nonprofit, private organization,” largely financed by government monies and subject to oversight by Congress, distributed funds to “four affiliate institutes: a Republican and a Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Free Trade Institute, and the Center for Private Enterprise” (122). By 1986, democracy promotion was “a defining feature of foreign policy” that also had bipartisan support. Schmidli credits democracy promotion with “a greater institutionalization of human rights—albeit narrowly defined—in US foreign policy” by the late 1980s (10).

The emphasis on democracy promotion in Nicaragua continued under President George H.W. Bush, but its methods differed. Whereas the Reagan administration dismissed the 1984 Nicaraguan election as a sham that was incapable of being democratic, “the Bush administration weaponized the US democracy promotion infrastructure against the Sandinistas” (221). In the lead-up to the 1990 election in Nicaragua, Bush used the NED to funnel financial support to anti-FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*; Sandinista National Liberation Front) efforts. Despite this US involvement, Schmidli stresses, it was the Nicaraguans at the polls who ousted the Sandinistas from power in 1990.

Schmidli points out the hypocrisy of Reagan’s democracy promotion. The approach included “deeply *undemocratic* practices that misled the US people, violated US law, and contributed to the immense human and material destruction in Nicaragua and the destabilization of the Sandinista political project” (6-7). The White House contended that the Sandinistas were Communists; therefore, they could not be democratic. Nor could they be trustworthy. For this reason, democracy promotion in Nicaragua boiled down to two words: “regime change” (140). Reagan officials found illegal ways to fund the Contras, the counterrevolutionaries who sought to overthrow the Sandinista government. At home, the administration’s Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean (S/LPD) produced and disseminated propaganda about Nicaragua, and officials worked with non-governmental supporters, like the right-wing, anti-Communist adventurer Jack Wheeler.

These undemocratic measures led to a less democratic Nicaragua. Although the FSLN aimed to create participatory democracy and improve the social and economic conditions for the Nicaraguan people, pressure from the United States’ covert war prompted a different result. The government suppressed civil liberties and diverted resources for defense, placing an enormous strain on the population. Reagan faced domestic opposition for these policies. As Schmidli contends, “Solidarity activists countered Reagan’s democracy promotion initiative...with their own vision of the promise of the Nicaraguan revolution” (172). Activists endorsed Nicaragua’s attempts to create a new society, and groups such as Witness for Peace publicized human rights abuses by the Contras.

Schmidli’s book raised several questions for me. First, Schmidli distinguishes Reagan’s human rights approach from that of Carter and Bush. I wondered about Reagan’s democracy promotion in a broader context. For example, how would Reagan’s democracy promotion compare with President Thomas Jefferson’s empire of liberty? In terms of the link between democracy promotion and human rights, how would Reagan’s ideas compare to those of Radical Republicans during Reconstruction? Schmidli also mentions US attempts to foster democracy in Germany and Japan after World War II. What difference, if any, is there between Reagan’s democracy promotion and “nation building”?

Second, I wanted to know more about the relationship between human rights and democracy promotion. Did Reagan place democracy promotion under the label of human rights in order to gain more support and/or because he fundamentally believed that democracy promotion was the core of human rights? Schmidli highlights the opposition of solidarity activists to Reagan’s policy toward Nicaragua. To what extent did solidarity activists center their critiques on Reagan’s democracy promotion versus general accusations that US policy violated Nicaraguans’ human rights? Did activists contend Reagan’s plan was undemocratic?

Schmidli focuses on Reagan's democracy promotion abroad; I wonder if Reagan officials saw any connections to the president's domestic agenda or deliberately discounted them. As Sarah B. Snyder argues in *From Selma to Moscow*, the policies of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon toward the minority white-led government of Southern Rhodesia mirrored each president's domestic concerns: civil rights and developing a Southern Strategy to attract white Democrats, respectively.² Did Reagan officials ever discuss NED's work and voting rights in the United States? Did Reagan's signing of the bill to extend the Voting Rights Act in 1982 impact his framing of voting rights abroad?

Finally, Reagan received bipartisan congressional support for his efforts regarding democracy promotion. I wonder whether there were potential conflicts. Schmidli notes that the highwater mark for Reagan's democracy promotion was 1986, given his lack of support for Haitian President Jean-Claude Duvalier and President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. How did this bipartisan congressional support coexist with Congress's decision to override Reagan's veto to pass the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986? Did members of Congress hold different visions of democracy promotion than Reagan?

William Michael Schmidli persuasively shows how the Reagan administration combined rollback, human rights, and democracy promotion. In doing so, *Freedom on the Offensive* offers new avenues for interrogating the sometimes undemocratic nature of US efforts to encourage human rights abroad.

² Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Response by William Michael Schmidli, Leiden University

I am grateful to Molly Avery, Jonathan R. Hunt, and Theresa Keeley for their thoughtful and stimulating reviews of my book; to Eline van Ommen for writing the introduction; and to the H-Diplo | RJISSF editors, Elisabeth Leake in particular, for organizing the roundtable. I am pleased that the reviewers find much to praise in *Freedom on the Offensive* and I appreciate their reflections on the book's contribution to our understanding of human rights and democracy promotion in US foreign relations.

The reviewers also raise challenging questions. Keeley asks how we should understand the democracy promotion initiative in relation to earlier eras in US history, and whether President Ronald Reagan positioned "democracy promotion under the label of human rights in order to gain more support and/or because he fundamentally believed that democracy promotion was the core of human rights."

Reagan defies an easy explanation. As Keeley implies, the fortieth president's faith in United States as a "city on a hill" could sound positively Jeffersonian in its idealizing of a hardy, up-by-the-bootstraps citizenry. "We are a nation that has a government—not the other way around," Reagan declared during his first inaugural address. "And this makes us special among the nations of the Earth."¹ Reagan's understanding of human rights flowed from this belief in American exceptionalism. In other words, for Reagan, human rights were indistinguishable from America's traditional moral concerns, and were only loosely tethered to the international human rights architecture that had been built in the postwar decades on the foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Reagan was a "democratic internationalist," noted biographer Lou Cannon. "He believed that those who did not live in America were equally entitled to the blessings of freedom and material prosperity."²

Moreover, Reagan's human rights policy fit neatly with the administration's aggressive approach to the Cold War. The administration took a narrow approach to human rights that emphasized political rights and civil liberties. Regular elections, the protection of civil liberties, and a free-market economy protecting the interests of corporate capitalism, emerged as the core of the US human rights policy during the 1980s. By contrast, social and economic rights, which had been championed throughout the Cold War by the Communist world and in the 1960s and 1970s by many third-world nationalists, were intentionally excluded from the Reagan administration's human rights framework. As Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Elliot Abrams put it, "You could make the argument that there aren't many countries where there are gross and consistent human rights violations, except the communist countries because they have the system itself."³ In sum, both sincerity *and* hypocrisy were evident in Reagan's human rights policy, and human rights concerns served as both the basis for the administration's democracy promotion initiative and as a mechanism to facilitate the intervention against Nicaragua.

Hunt asks whether the Nicaragua case is generalizable in terms of US democracy promotion. To be sure, US material support for the Contras' terror campaign against the Sandinista government—including the illegal activities that led to the Iran-Contra scandal—was categorically different compared to US actions toward repressive anti-Communist allies like Chile's Augusto Pinochet. But if Nicaragua was an extreme case of US-backed terrorism, it nonetheless illuminated how the Reagan Doctrine, with its imperative of rolling back perceived Communist gains in the developing world, infused the democracy promotion initiative. Put simply,

¹ Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1981, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1981>.

² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 404.

³ Elliott Abrams, quoted in Charles Maechling Jr., "Human Rights Dehumanized," *Foreign Policy* 52 (Autumn 1983): 124.

the US supported democratization as long as US-backed candidates won. As the US ambassador to Chile, Harry G. Barnes, Jr., bluntly told a group of Chilean center-right politicians, “U.S. pressure on Pinochet is contingent on their responsible behavior, i.e. no flirtation with the communists.”⁴ In this sense, Nicaragua was no exception: by fusing the Reagan Doctrine with the liberal internationalist appeal of the democracy promotion initiative, officials aligned the United States rhetorically behind democratization processes in the developing world, while dismissing the 1984 Nicaraguan national elections as a “Soviet-style sham.”⁵

But, Hunt continues, did the Iran-Contra scandal derail Reagan’s democracy-promotion initiative? To be sure, the scandal stymied Reagan’s efforts to drum up congressional support for continued US military assistance for the Contras in his final years in office. It also created an opening for Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, who managed to pull together regional support for a peace plan despite US opposition. As Reagan handed the keys to the White House to his successor, George H.W. Bush, the Sandinistas were still in power and the US Contra policy was on life-support.

Yet Bush’s weaponization of the US democracy promotion infrastructure against the Sandinistas illuminated the staying power of democracy promotion as the centerpiece of the US human rights policy. In the lead-up to the 1990 Nicaraguan national elections, the White House won bipartisan congressional support for maintaining US pressure on the Nicaraguan economy, keeping the Contras alive, and shepherding a diverse array of opposition parties into a viable political coalition. The subsequent victory of Violeta Chamorro, the leader of the US-backed political coalition *Unión Nacional Opositora* (National Opposition Union), underscored how democracy promotion could advance US political goals. As the Latin American Studies Association’s observer team pointed out, the election “represented a ‘free and fair’ electoral process within a climate of United States-generated military and economic pressure.”⁶ As a result, the US exercised enormous sway over Nicaragua. In the 1990s, as historian David Johnson Lee writes, “the United States held ultimate veto power over whatever government was in power in Managua by the threat to withhold all international aid. The country could maintain the unpredictable processes of democratic negotiation, while the United States maintained its status as final arbiter over Nicaragua’s precarious territory.”⁷

Let me now turn to Keeley’s important question of whether the Reagan administration drew connections between democracy promotion abroad and the president’s domestic agenda. The answer, in my view, is yes: the Reagan administration’s efforts to contain both the Communist world and the perceived threat of third world nationalism, on the one hand, and the administration’s efforts to head off domestic demands for social and economic justice, on the other, were inextricably linked to Reagan’s core conservative beliefs, and, by extension, to his narrow vision of human rights. Put simply, the administration pursued a policy of containment—infused by human rights discourse—on multiple fronts at home and abroad.

By the late 1960s, domestic rights activism had moved beyond demands for formal political equality to broader social and economic claims. In particular, building on an active history of postwar Black internationalism, Black Power activists identified with post-colonial states and national liberation struggles

⁴ Quoted in Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, “Soldiering On: The Reagan Administration and Redemocratisation in Chile, 1983–1986,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 25:1 (2006): 16.

⁵ Doyle McManus, “Reagan Sees Nicaraguan Vote as ‘Soviet-Style Sham,’ Urges Regional Leaders to Cooperate,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1984, B19.

⁶ Latin American Studies Association, *Electoral Democracy under International Pressure: The Report of the Latin American Studies Association Commission to Observe the 1990 Nicaraguan Election* (Pittsburgh: PA: Latin American Studies Association, 15 March 1990), <https://lasaweb.org/uploads/reports/electoraldemocracypressure.pdf>.

⁷ David Johnson Lee, *The Ends of Modernization: Nicaragua and the United States in the Cold War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 171.

abroad and forged new claims for self-identification.⁸ They self-identified, in other words, as part of the third world, a radical imaginary that was embraced by other ethnic activist groups including Chicano/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.⁹ As Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps write, “the sense was strong that people of color worldwide were in motion, freeing themselves from centuries of slavery, genocide, and imperialism—and that America’s inner cities suffered third world underdevelopment within the First World.”¹⁰ Although Black Power’s influence peaked at the beginning of the 1970s, the movement’s emphasis on social and economic justice was evident in the activities of organizations such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and the National Rainbow Coalition.¹¹

Such social and economic demands on the government were anathema to Reagan. Welfare was “America’s No. 1 problem,” Reagan argued in 1971.¹² Ten years later, in his inaugural address, the fortieth president famously declared, “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”¹³ Indeed, Reagan’s domestic agenda amounted to a kind of self-imposed structural adjustment program that dovetailed with the Washington consensus demands on developing states to pursue sweeping deregulation, privatization, and liberalization. Unlike developing states, however, Reagan could operate outside the logic of debt repayment and balanced budgets; even as he cut taxes and welfare programs, the president oversaw a massive increase in US defense spending—a military Keynesianism that contributed to a tripling of the national debt to \$3 trillion between 1980 and 1989.¹⁴ Yet as in the developing world, Reagan’s policies had a powerful and negative impact on the working class. By disproportionately benefiting the richest Americans, Reagan’s tax reforms accelerated rising inequality. In the short term, by 1989 the share of national wealth held by the richest one percent of Americans had nearly doubled to 39 percent; over the longer term, between 1979 and 2004 the average after-tax income of the richest one percent increased 256 percent, while the income of the poorest 20 percent of American households increased a mere 10 percent.¹⁵

Correspondingly, Reagan’s cuts to welfare and his opposition to unions placed tremendous strain on working-class Americans who were still reeling from the economic challenges of the 1970s. Close to 700,000 poor Americans lost some or all of their welfare benefits, and one million people became ineligible for food-stamps.¹⁶ The administration cut federal training programs that were aimed at assisting poor people find work from \$15.6 billion in 1980 to \$5 billion in 1985, reduced federal funding for school lunch programs was, and

⁸ On Black internationalism in the early postwar era, see John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation, 1945–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On Black internationalism in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

⁹ For a useful overview, see Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, “Rainbow Radicalism: The Rise of Radical Ethnic Nationalism,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 193–228.

¹⁰ Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 198.

¹¹ Brick and Phelps, 189.

¹² Quoted in Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 201.

¹³ Reagan, “Inaugural Address.”

¹⁴ Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980–1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56.

¹⁵ Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 223; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 21–22. Hacker and Pierson point out that this inequality is even starker considering that working-age married couples with children worked on average 406 additional hours outside the home in 2000 compared to 1979.

¹⁶ Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 59–60.

made revisions to education grant and loan programs for needy students that put funding for higher education out of reach for many poor Americans.¹⁷ At the same time, Reagan's response to the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike accelerated a rapid decline in private sector union membership from 20 percent in 1980 to 12.5 percent in 1990.¹⁸

All working-class Americans felt the impact of Reagan's tax and welfare reforms. Yet the programs that the administration placed on the chopping block, combined with a higher concentration of poverty among non-whites, resulted in a disproportionately negative impact on Americans of color, particularly African Americans. "Reagan's budget proposals targeted very specifically those programs in which blacks were overrepresented," writes Carol Anderson, "even as he protected the other portions of the 'social safety net,' such as social security, where African Americans were but a small fraction of the recipients."¹⁹ African Americans in impoverished urban areas were hit especially hard. At the outset of the 1980s, cities across the United States reflected the legacy left by decades of housing segregation, as state and federal resources flowed to racially-restricted white suburbs, and inner-city Blacks struggled to overcome exploitation and predation by both the public and private sector.²⁰

By the end of the 1970s, massive deindustrialization across the Northeast "Rust Belt" reached crisis proportions, as blue-collar jobs disappeared and local governments struggled to stretch shrinking tax revenues to balance budgets and provide basic services. In this context, Reagan's cuts to federal urban spending—which fell from 12 percent of the budget in 1980 to 3 percent in 1990—had an outsized impact on African Americans.²¹ Likewise, with the total Black unemployment rate at 15.5 percent and more than 45 percent of Black youth unemployed, reductions to federal poverty alleviation and job training programs had serious repercussions for millions of African Americans.²² At the same time, Reagan's expansion of the "war on drugs" channeled hundreds of millions of dollars into policing illegal narcotics and led to new harsh-sentencing laws that facilitated the incarceration of unprecedented numbers of African American men.²³

Significantly, Reagan positioned these policies in a discourse of political rights and liberties that dovetailed with the administration's narrow interpretation of human rights. Reagan was an entrepreneur of an emerging "colorblind conservatism" that narrowly framed the Civil Rights Movement as a heroic struggle for political rights that had ended, triumphantly, in the mid-1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.²⁴ As Reagan blithely put it, shortly before signing legislation making Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a federal holiday, "ultimately, the great lesson of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life was this: He was a

¹⁷ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue, *These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1945 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 225; Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016), 120.

¹⁸ Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 225. See also Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 223.

¹⁹ Anderson, *White Rage*, 119.

²⁰ See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

²¹ Gilmore and Sugrue, *These United States*, 256.

²² Anderson, *White Rage*, 121.

²³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised ed. (New York: New Press, 2012), 48–51; Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, "Guns and Butter: The Welfare State, the Carceral State, and the Politics of Exclusion in the Postwar United States," *Journal of American History* 102:1 (2015): 87–99; David Farber, *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 129–162.

²⁴ Matthew D. Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6–7.

great man who wrested justice from the heart of a great country—and he succeeded because that great country had a heart to be seized.”²⁵

It was a revisionist history that elided the movement’s potentially transformative social and economic demands. “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, [this] narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement,” Jacquelyn Dowd Hall writes. “It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its gravitas.”²⁶ More to the point, even as Reagan’s cuts to federal welfare programs frayed an already thin social welfare net, conservatives could denigrate “welfare queens,” and claim that only the poor were to blame for their impoverishment.²⁷ “Free to compete in a market-driven society, African Americans thereafter bore the onus of their own failure or success,” Hall concludes. “If stark group inequalities persisted, black attitudes, behavior, and family structures were to blame.”²⁸

Moreover, Reagan’s colorblind conservatism doubled down on the New Right’s effort to appeal to working-class whites who had traditionally voted for the Democrats. For example, Reagan pointedly made the County Fair in Neshoba, Mississippi, the first stop in his 1980 general campaign—less than two dozen miles from the site where three civil rights activists had been brutally murdered in 1964. “I believe in states’ rights,” Reagan told the crowd, an unmistakable dog-whistle that signaled opposition to federal civil rights legislation.²⁹

The impact of the Reagan era on Americans of color illuminates both the administration’s effort to contain domestic claims for social and economic justice and how Reagan’s ideational approach to politics operated with similar results in the domestic and foreign realms. Shackled with debt, leaders in the developing world found little solace in the Reagan administration’s emphasis on the interrelated freedoms of democracy and the market. After what is often referred to as the “lost decade” of the 1980s, by 1990 an incredible 46 percent of the population of Latin America was living in poverty.³⁰ As Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín complained in mid-1984, “the country... is still on the edge of a precipice.” Referring to US policymakers’ use of structural adjustment as leverage to elicit wide-ranging economic reforms, Alfonsín warned that “if we accept recessive economic recipes, our democracy itself would be at stake.”³¹

Similarly, the unequal impact of Reagan’s policies at home did not go unnoticed. “The policies and programs of the Reagan Administration are consistently criticized and attacked by prominent Black leaders, Black organizations and Black press,” noted an internal White House memo the following month. Such criticism, the memo warned, perpetuated an image of “a President who is unsympathetic to the plight of the poor and needy, and a threat to the gains in civil rights over the past twenty years.”³² As the prominent African American political activist Jesse Jackson declared at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, “this

²⁵ Bernard Weinraub, “Reagan Tells Pupils of Struggle Won by Dr. King,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1986, A14.

²⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91:4 (2005): 1233-1263, here 1234.

²⁷ Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 203.

²⁸ Hall, 1237.

²⁹ Bob Herbert, “Righting Reagan’s Wrongs?” *New York Times*, 13 November 2007, A29.

³⁰ Duncan Green, *Silent Revolution: The Rise and Crisis of Market Economics in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003), 85.

³¹ Edward Schumacher, “Defending Argentina’s New Democracy,” *New York Times*, 10 June 1984, SM26.

³² White House Memo, Elizabeth Dole to James A. Baker, “Black Strategy,” 24 February 1982, excerpt reprinted in Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer, *Conservatives in Power: The Reagan Years, 1981–1989* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 106-107.

Administration has made life more miserable for the poor. Its attitude has been contemptuous. Its policies and programs have been cruel and unfair to working people.”³³

To an extent that has not been fully explored in the existing scholarship, the Reagan era thus signified a profound setback to struggles for social and economic justice both at home and abroad. Examining Reagan’s embrace of democracy promotion as the cornerstone of the administration’s human rights policy helps us understand key political, economic, and social developments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. There were, of course, many factors that shaped US foreign policy and domestic politics during this period. But the interplay between Reagan’s ideas on human rights and democracy and his pursuit of a policy of containment at home and abroad was significant. Indeed, as democracy entered into a sustained crisis both in the United States and in much of the world in the early twenty-first century, it is clear that the Reagan era still mattered a great deal.

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³³ Jesse Jackson, address at the Democratic National Convention, 18 July 1984, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/jesse/speeches/jesse84speech.html>.