

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

### No. 341- Author's RESPONSE

Published on 15 February 2012

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editors: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Author's Response to Alan McPherson, Review of Vanni Pettinà. "The Shadows of Cold War over Latin America: The U.S. Reaction to Fidel Castro's Nationalism, 1956-59." *Cold War History* 11: 3 (August 2011): 317-339. DOI: 10.1080/14682741003686115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682741003686115> .**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR341-Response.pdf>

[The original review is available at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR341.pdf>]

Response by **Vanni Pettinà**, Kluge Postdoctoral Fellow, Library of Congress

In the spirit of scholarly exchange, I take this opportunity to write a brief reply to Alan McPherson's recent review of my article, "The Shadows of Cold War over Latin America: The U.S. Reaction to Fidel Castro's Nationalism, 1956-59."<sup>1</sup> First, I want to thank Professor McPherson for the time he took to review the article and for his comments. I admire his work and respect his expertise on U.S.-Latin American history, so I take his concerns very seriously. By clarifying the aims and scope of my argument (as well as the evidence upon which it rests), my response to these concerns is as well a reassertion of my conclusions.

As readers of the article and McPherson's review will know, my article represents an attempt to revise our understanding of Washington's reaction to the Cuban insurrection before it turned into a socialist revolution. Most scholarship has tended to cast an aura of inevitability around the clash between Castro and Washington. This tendency also emerges in McPherson's review, which he opens by identifying Washington's opposition to Castro's "Revolution" as the subject of my article. At the end of the review he returns to this depiction, referring to my attempt to contextualize American opposition to Castro's revolution in a wider perspective. As he argues, "a global view should not blind us to the primacy of local factors for revolution, especially in Latin America." The point requires

---

<sup>1</sup> Vanni Pettinà, "The Shadows of Cold War over Latin America: The U.S. Reaction to Fidel Castro's Nationalism, 1956-59," *Cold War History* 11: 3 (August 2011): 317-339. The review is located at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR341.pdf>

emphasis: my research is not squarely focused on Washington's opposition to Castro's revolution, but rather on the U.S. response to Castro's insurrection, which is quite a different matter in terms of content and chronology. In his review, McPherson—aligning himself with the trend of much of the existing literature—did not engage with this conceptual difference. For the common assumption is that opposing Castro in 1956-1959 already meant, for Washington, countering his revolutionary plan for a systemic change of the Cuban political and social structures. In contrast, my opinion is that between 1956 and 1959 the Eisenhower administration was not opposing a social revolution but engaging with a political phenomenon it associated with a broader Cold War perspective.

In his attempt to restate the primacy of local and economic factors, McPherson also insists that I ignore the events that took place after 1959, when U.S. businessmen rushed to Washington protesting Castro's plans for nationalization of utilities and agrarian reform. It is not that I ignore these events but rather that my article is precisely arguing that the Cold War's global dimensions (*not* just local or economic factors) were the main driving forces behind Washington's opposition to the insurrection between 1956 and 1959. Indeed, as I argue, it was the Cold War and the global dimension it assumed at least from the early 1950s onward that determined how Washington looked at Latin America and Cuba. During the early 1950s, Washington felt it was losing the battle for the hearts and the minds of nationalists in the Third World. This pushed the Eisenhower administration into a defensive position when it came to interacting with nationalist movements. In Latin America, where Washington had arrived at a *modus vivendi* for dealing with nationalist forces during the 1930s and the 1940s, this new context played a pivotal role and was decisive in preventing Washington from establishing a less confrontational posture with Castro before his revolutionary turn.

Besides these broader conceptual points, McPherson's reference to bibliographical gaps in the article's citations was inaccurate and simply unfair. He writes that I did not cite two crucial and relevant works: one by Thomas Paterson, the other by Richard Welch. In fact, I cite Paterson's work no fewer than three times in the article. Meanwhile, Welch's book does not deal specifically with the time period covered in my article, focusing instead on the period *after* 1959.<sup>2</sup>

Allow me to respond to more substantive concerns. McPherson suggests that my analysis of both U.S. foreign policy toward the Third World, and Latin America's place within a global set of U.S. concerns about the so-called periphery during the 1950s, adds little to what is already known. For McPherson, Latin America was simply different from the other parts of the Third World, and U.S. policies toward it were shaped by assumptions

---

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Paterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Richard E. Welch Jr., *Response to Revolution: The United States and the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1961* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

based on local, specific strategic interests. By contrast, my analysis shows that the problematic relations Washington had with Third World nationalists during the 1950s were a dynamic and complex phenomenon that had a direct impact on its approach to Latin America. Yes, other scholars have similarly argued that U.S. policymakers perceived the Kremlin to have got the upper hand in the Third World by the mid-1950s.<sup>3</sup> What I add to this story, however, is that, precisely within this context, Latin America was increasingly feared as a target for broader Third World Soviet policies through a set of political and economic practices that had already seen substantial successes in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Again, I am perfectly aware that other scholars have pointed out that the Cold War was pivotal in influencing U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America. Piero Gleijeses, for example, has ably shown how Cold War fears impacted the American perception of the Guatemalan political process during the early 1950s and led to U.S. support for the 1954 coup against Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán's government.<sup>4</sup> However, my article suggests that it was not just an overreaction to Cold War variables that shaped U.S. policymakers' decisions, given the fact that Latin America was considered part of a wider Third World context in which the U.S. viewed the Kremlin's strategies as particularly successful. Indeed, what I argue in my article is that this framework negatively influenced the United States' response to Latin American nationalism in many cases and played a decisive role in preventing the Eisenhower administration from maintaining a position of dialogue towards Castro before 1959-1960. As I see it, in Latin America Washington did not confuse nationalism with communism, nor were its policies shaped by the defense of consolidated economic interests. It was the global context that was most important. Such a line of argumentation is, I maintain, a significant contribution to the historiography.

McPherson claims that I do not produce enough evidence to show that Latin America and Cuba were part of this story. As noted above, in his interpretation of the dynamics shaping U.S. policies in Latin America and Cuba McPherson finds meaning in local and economic variables, rather than in the new global context. It is true, as McPherson points out, that the article draws primarily on CIA sources and public records in the section where I discuss the relationship between U.S. foreign policy, the Third World, and Latin America. I still consider CIA documents and CIA analysis papers as valuable sources of information, especially during the Eisenhower years when intelligence materials were avidly read and very often shaped policymakers' opinions and strategies. However, since publication of "The Shadows of Cold War over Latin America," I have had the opportunity to conduct research at both the Dwight Eisenhower Library and at the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. The documents unearthed in both archives further

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered hope: the Guatemalan revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1991).

support the article's conclusion that Washington's policies in Latin America were primarily shaped by the same kind of concerns that worried the U.S. in other parts of the Third World and that, in turn, the Soviet Union successes in these areas reinforced U.S. concerns in the Western Hemisphere. Indeed, these kinds of concerns were not limited to the CIA but were also shared by the Department of State and the National Security Council. The Eisenhower library holds documents that make reference to Latin America as precisely part of the broader global periphery. They also compare political processes of convergence between communism and nationalism throughout the Third World, and include Latin America in those comparisons.

In July 1954, for example, the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) of the National Security Council prepared a report on Latin America for Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the United States' Ambassador to the United Nations. The report briefed Cabot Lodge on the main problems affecting the Western Hemisphere and guided him through the debates on Latin American political and economic positions at the UN. Among several different items, the report stated that in previous years Moscow had instructed the region's communist parties to follow a "national front strategy" of alliance with other progressive parties.<sup>5</sup> In December 1956, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department compared the results of this strategy in Africa, Asia and Latin America. True, the document recognized that in Africa and Asia the national liberation front strategy had been more successful than in Latin America up to that point due to the proximity of the Soviet Union and political instability affecting those regions. Nonetheless, the report also stressed that the strategy had given Latin American communist parties more flexibility and strongly improved the capacity for Marxist parties to achieve power.<sup>6</sup> In March 1958, it was then Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, who underlined that national front strategies were allowing the Kremlin to ride the nationalist tide in Latin America, exactly as it had done in other parts of the Third World.<sup>7</sup> In November 1958 an OCB report on NSC 5613/1, the administration policy paper on Latin America, argued that Latin American Communist parties were trying to establish alliances with local nationalist forces, as they had done in "Egypt, India and Indonesia" where they had formed "neutralist" governments.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library, White House Office, National Security council Staff: Papers, 1948-1961, OBC Central File Series, Box 71, "Declassification of Material for Ambassador Lodge and Mr. Woodward", 26 of July 1954.

<sup>6</sup> Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library, White House Office, National Security council Staff: papers: 1948-1961, OBC Central File Series, Box 75, "Communism in Latin America", Prepared by the office Intelligence and Research, Department of State, 18 of April 1956; Annex 7, 7 of December 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library, Office of the Secretary of State, 1952-1961, Subjects Series, Alphabetical Subseries, Box 7, "Soviet Bloc Efforts at Penetration of Latin America", 14 of March 1958.

<sup>8</sup> Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, (OSANSA): Records NSC Series, Policy Papers Subseries, Box 18, NSC 5613/1 Policy

In short, by at least by the mid-to-late 1950s, for American policymakers there was a global perception of the Soviet offensive in the Third World that included Latin America as part of this picture. We can, of course, debate how “prudent” or “foolish”—to use Melvyn P. Leffler’s words—were the men who shaped U.S. policy toward the Third World which, in their view, included Latin America.<sup>9</sup> But that is a different story entirely. What is important here is not judging whether their policies were right or wrong, but rather understanding how these men conceptualized Latin America within contemporary frameworks. McPherson is too quick in rejecting the hypothesis that this conceptualization of Latin America (and the policies it bore) was more the result of a prudent approach than of a foolish one. However, until we have more access to Soviet and Soviet bloc archives, a definitive answer to this particular question remains elusive.

Finally, in responding to McPherson’s review, I accept that as a non-native English speaker there may have been grammatical mistakes in my article and for that and any other errors I made I apologize. For the record, slips also happen when English speakers refer to foreign names (my last name is actually spelt Pettinà and not Pettinà as McPherson refers to me in his review).<sup>10</sup>

In writing this reply, it is my hope that readers of H-Diplo will excuse errors and engage with the ideas and arguments that my research puts forward. Those interested in reading more of my work on the U.S. and Cuba, and the extensive research I have conducted on twentieth-century U.S.-Cuban relations, are invited to read my latest book, *Cuba y Estados Unidos, 1933-1959. Del Compromiso Nacionalista al Conflicto* (Los Libros de la Catarata, Madrid, 2011). As Rafael Rojas, one of the most recognized scholars of Cuban history, argues in his recent and positive review of my book, my research challenges one of the most consolidated orthodoxies in Latin American, European and, especially, U.S. universities.<sup>11</sup> Of course, any attempt to review clichés is predictably going to generate opposition. But I look forward to the debate that this generates. For now, I am grateful to H-Diplo as well as to Professor McPherson for launching what I hope will become a spirited discussion of my ideas, and I look forward to future exchanges on the subject of U.S. conceptions of Latin America’s place in the world in the 1950s and beyond.

---

Towards Latin America (1), “Operations Coordinating Board Report, US Policies Towards Latin America (NSC 5613/1)”, 26 of November 1958, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, : Stanford University Press, 1992), 502, 506, 502-511.

<sup>10</sup> Note from the editors: The editors of H-Diplo apologize to Dr. Pettinà for not catching this error before publication. We have corrected the pdf copy of the review.

<sup>11</sup> Rafael Rojas, “Diario de Cuba”, *Vuelta a la Buena Vecindad* (<http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/8868-vuelta-la-buena-vecindad> ).

**Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.**

---

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).