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What's Democracy Got to Do with It? American Exceptionalism Revisited

In "Breaking with Statism," Evan McCormick disputes a large body of revisionist scholarship which has argued for decades that the Ronald Reagan administration's efforts at democracy promotion in Latin America were a mere cover for maintaining American hegemony.¹ Dismissing revisionists for their alleged "cynicism," McCormick contends that "U.S. money and expertise constructively supported the practical aims of local civil society groups in achieving transitions to civilian rule" (747). To demonstrate this thesis the author analyzes the democracy promotion programs of the National Education for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), using Guatemala and Chile as case studies. These "public-private democracy promotion programs" were, according to McCormick, "remarkably diverse, including legal and logistical support for labor unions; funding for organizations that raised voter awareness and encouraged participation in transitional elections; the purchase of ballot paper and other election-day supplies; and the provision of seed money for think tanks seeking to spread free market ideas." (746) Their success in helping Guatemala and Chile move from dictatorship to democracy illustrates that there was a "growing ideological consensus in U.S. foreign policy institutions that the spread of free elections and free markets was universal and worthy of U.S. support, regardless of the costs, limits, and tradeoffs" (747).

If postmodernism has taught diplomatic historians anything it is that we can no longer take for granted that the words used by historical actors have a simple universal meaning.² The failure to define 'democracy' is the fatal flaw in this analysis of the Reagan administration's so-called democracy promotion programs. Although McCormick wishes to distance himself from the inflated claims of the proponents of these programs (746), he embraces their assumptions that democracy equals neoliberalism and can be measured by the holding of elections. As Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead observed a long

¹ In addition to the sources cited by the author in his note 20, see Lars Schoultz, *In their Own Best Interest: A History of the U.S. Effort to Improve Latin Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Alan L. McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America since 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005); Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Interventionism in Central America and the Struggle for Peace*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1999); Susanne Jonas, "Reagan Administration Policy in Central America," in David E. Kyvig, ed., *Reagan and the World* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 97-118; Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Jeff McMahan, *Reagan and the World: Imperial Policy in the New Cold War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985).

² Frank Costigliola, "Reading for Meaning: Theory, Language, and Metaphor." In *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, 279-303 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

time ago, Washington welcomes formal elections in regions such as Latin America so long as they serve American interests by ensuring stability and countering criticisms of U.S. dominance.³

McCormick's insistence that the Reagan administration's democracy promotion programs were more genuine than their predecessors, such as the Alliance for Progress, is belied by the same contradiction that plagued all such efforts. While professing great passion for democratic ideals during the Cold War, U.S. officials routinely supported the militaries of most Latin American countries in order to ensure that leftist nationalistic regimes did not come to power. The author's admission that "The amount of money disbursed through democracy promotion efforts in Latin America was dwarfed by spending on military assistance and training" (770) is not followed up by any explanation, leaving the reader to wonder why Washington would promote democratic and anti-democratic forces at the same time. The answer is that democracy is fine so long as the right people are elected. If there is a danger that the wrong people might get into office, then a dictator is needed to ensure that U.S. interests are protected. President John F. Kennedy explained it best when he was trying to decide whether to support a military dictatorship in the Dominican Republic: "There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we can't really renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."⁴

By the early 1980s, the growth of international human rights organizations made it too embarrassing to keep supporting dictators, so Washington turned to organizations like NED to defeat regimes it did not like. The most egregious example of this kind of interference was NED's blatant subsidy of the Sandinista's opposition in the Nicaraguan presidential election of 1990.⁵ McCormick touches briefly on this activity (753) while failing to notice that NED's support for a Nicaraguan newspaper like *La Prensa* constituted a violation of Nicaraguan sovereignty, much as the CIA had done in the early 1970s with its subsidy of *El Mercurio*, Chile's leading newspaper that demanded the overthrow of President Salvador Allende. While communication technologies have certainly changed, how was NED's interference in the Nicaraguan election any different than the Russian interference in the most recent U.S. presidential election? Should we interpret Vladimir Putin's authorization of Russian bots to help elect Donald Trump president as an example of "democracy promotion?" Even in Costa Rica, which was hardly a threat to U.S. national security, NED supported a conservative elite seeking to attack the welfare state and to undermine President Oscar Arias's peacemaking efforts.⁶

Examples such as these raise serious questions about the contention in this article that democracy promotion programs of the early 1980s were joint public-private ventures. Given that NED received nearly all of its funding from the U.S. government, it hardly qualifies as a "quasi-nongovernmental organization." That Reagan himself, who fawned over the dictators Augusto Pinochet of Chile and Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala, appears to have been barely aware of NED's activities, might seem to suggest that NED was given great autonomy. But as McCormick's article shows, it was officials like Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams who understood that U.S. interests were no longer served by dictators like Pinochet anymore, so it was better to dump them. NED provided the ideal vehicle.

³ Edward S. Herman, and Frank Brodhead, *Demonstration Elections: U.S.-Staged Elections in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 1-2.

⁴ Quoted in Stephen M. Streeter, "Nation-building in the Land of Eternal Counterinsurgency: Guatemala and the Contradictions of the Alliance for Progress," *Third World Quarterly* 27 (February 2006), 64.

⁵ William I. Robinson, *A Faustian Bargain: U.S. Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War* (Boulder: Westview, 1992).

⁶ Martha Honey, *Hostile Acts: U.S. Policy in Costa Rica in the 1980s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 104; William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 528.

While the Alliance for Progress was at least ostensibly a multilateral program, NED was established without consulting any foreign country, and the institutions it generated promoted a neoliberal vision of democracy. NED was also taken over by rightwing Reagan administration hawks, who viewed it as an instrument to defeat Communism.⁷ As one scholar has put it, NED represented a “kind of softer version of the CIA, not engaged in covert activities but nonetheless seeking to influence the course of domestic politics in ways that advance U.S. interests.”⁸ McCormick claims that the Reagan administration supported democratic elections “regardless of the costs, limits, and tradeoffs” but he never specifies what those were. The article opens with the odd example of an elite Argentine woman pondering how to restore democracy to the country after the dirty war. She eventually decides to seek assistance from NED to support a voluntary civil organization named *Conciencia* that will “sell democracy like cosmetics.” McCormick describes this association as an “unlikely partnership” because *Conciencia* “prided itself on the virtues of voluntary association and the free market” (745). Given that the United States has long promoted the Open Door in Latin America, one wonders why this is surprising. That Washington would help eradicate Argentine dissidents through Operation Condor and then turn around to support a civil organization that espoused neoliberalism is entirely consistent with the history of U.S. policies toward Latin America.⁹ Given that the purpose of advertising is to deceive consumers, the analogy of selling democracy like beauty products reflects not merely the class bias of *Conciencia* but also its paternalistic assumption that Argentines needed to be instructed on democracy.

Remarkably, McCormick never mentions that Guatemala and Chile both had at one time democratically elected governments that were overthrown by CIA-backed coups, which led to brutal dictatorships that destroyed the left and adopted neoliberal policies with Washington’s blessings.¹⁰ In fact, these two cases illustrate well the dictator disposal problem. Once generals like Rios Montt and Augusto Pinochet had done Washington’s dirty work of counterrevolution, they became liabilities in the face of growing international criticism of their human rights violations. Sponsoring elections became a convenient way to get rid of them, especially after it was clear that no leftist candidate hostile to the United States had any chance of winning. In the case of Chile, Patricio Aylwin, the first democratically elected president to succeed Pinochet, was a Christian Democrat who had endorsed the 1973 coup.¹¹ In the case of Guatemala, Vinicio Cerezo, also a Christian Democrat, was a weak president who was unable to dissuade the Reagan administration from renewing military aid.

Another general problem with this article is that it overstates the U.S. contribution to democratic transitions while underplaying the role of Latin Americans. There is no doubt that NED contributed to the fairness of the 1988 national plebiscite in Chile, but McCormick overreaches in asserting that “U.S. technical assistance proved crucial during the pivotal moments of the plebiscite.” (768) Chile’s rapid recovery from Pinochet’s devastation is testimony to the long struggle by social activists who never gave up on Chile’s democratic traditions. I remember while I was on a short visit to Santiago just before the plebiscite witnessing courageous students gathering near the Constitution Plaza to sing protest songs before they

⁷ Kate Geoghegan, “A Policy in Tension: The National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Response to the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *Diplomatic History* 42:5 (2018), 776.

⁸ Michael J. Kryzaneck, *U.S.-Latin America Relations*, 4th ed. (New York: Praeger, 2008), 151-152.

⁹ J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 73-77. See also Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

¹⁰ For a lengthy discussion of these two cases, see Stephen M. Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution: The United States and Guatemala, 1954-1961* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); and “Uncool and Incorrect”: *The Nixon Administration and the Downfall of Chilean President Salvador Allende* (forthcoming).

¹¹ James Peck, *Ideal Illusions: How the U.S. Government Co-Opted Human Rights* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 125-126.

were forced to flee as the Carabineros chased after them with tear gas and tanks. In the long run, Chileans would have gotten rid of Pinochet regardless of NED's assistance.

In Guatemala, according to McCormick, Cerezo was only able to take "actions to realize social justice and expand civilian authority" because of U.S. support. Moreover General "Mejía reassured Guatemalans that the army would take its orders from the civilian government." (760-61). Here too, the author overstates U.S. influence while mistaking Cerezo's election as a true indication that Guatemala had successfully made the transition to democracy. I happened to be in Guatemala on a Fulbright Fellowship during the Cerezo presidency, and practically every Guatemalan I talked to thought that the military, not Cerezo, was really in charge. As Jennifer Schirmer's interviews later revealed, Cerezo had cut a deal with General Héctor Gramajo which allowed Cerezo to hold office while the military continued to murder and torture suspects at will.¹² The Cerezo administration, the political scientist Susanne Jonas has observed, "evolved into a civilian version of the counterinsurgency state, in some respects a continuation of what had been imposed in the late 1960s."¹³

The notion that the United States has had anything to teach Latin America about democracy would be amusing if it did not appear to insult the memory of all those social activists who were tortured or murdered at the hands of death squads equipped and trained by the United States. Chile is arguably a more democratic country than the United States today, but not because of U.S. assistance in helping Chile to recover from the Pinochet dictatorship, which Washington helped install.¹⁴ Guatemala remains a highly flawed democracy, partly because the ethnic divide was never resolved, and partly because the fledgling democratic institutions of the reform period known as "the ten years of spring" were demolished by a military coup that the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration engineered in 1954. Institutions like NED may have helped countries such as Guatemala stage an election, but their real purpose was to ensure that Latin America stayed on the neoliberal path. Democracy had little to do with it.

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¹² Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 186-205.

¹³ Susanne Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 26.

¹⁴ In 2018 Chile ranked just above the United States in the Economic Intelligence Unit's ranking of democracy in the world's leading countries. See "Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy," https://www.prensa.com/politica/democracy-index_LPRFIL20190112_0001.pdf.