

David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Pop quiz time. Name those responsible for the following quotes: (1) "There is no doubt that a very definite struggle is going on between the violent radical wing of the Nazi Party ... and what may be termed the more moderate section of the party, headed by Hitler himself ... which appeal[s] to all civilized and reasonable people." (2) "Brazil's democratic development has probably been strengthened in the long run" by the 1964 military coup d'état; and (3) The U.S. "devotion to the principles of democracy is a historical fact." Time's up. Score 100 if you answered (1) George Gordon, American chargé d'affaires in Berlin, 1933, (2) the CIA, April 1, 1964, and (3) the U.S. State Department, March 1964.

In the long historical debate over American exceptionalism, one issue seems beyond question. While other great powers over the centuries have claimed their foreign interventions and maneuvers to be a product of national interest, realpolitik, or (in the case of the British), the advancement of "civilization," U.S. leaders have consistently suggested that their policy initiatives reflected a moral decision to promote democracy and democratic principles abroad. Such an insistence on the part of policymakers has produced a rather fantastic discourse in which even the most obnoxious dictators (from Hitler and Mussolini to Somoza and Pinochet) are transformed into "moderates" who will — immediately or ultimately — promote the course of democratic development.

David Schmitz's book casts an extremely useful spotlight on the long-term U.S. practice of supporting whatever foreign leader can best further its policy aims and the discursive dilemmas this creates when dictators are packaged as democrats de jour. The book is particularly valuable in the context of the post-Cold War reexamination of U.S. foreign policy and its recent military interventions into the former Yugoslavia and Iraq. The Kosovo policy, above all, tended to depict in the public mind the picture of a national policy driven solely by humanitarian and altruistic desires. While Congress debated whether the United States should be the global purveyor of democracy, few voices were raised to question whether U.S. policy had other, more self-interested, aims in mind. Schmitz's examination of the U.S. support for right-wing dictators between 1921 and 1965 is a needed antidote to the triumphalist clang of the late 1990s.

Latin Americanists will be familiar with most of Schmitz's targets: U.S. support for the "depression dictators" in Central America (including the vicious and likely unbalanced General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador and Anastasio Somoza García in Nicaragua), Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in Guatemala, or General Humberto Castello Branco in Brazil in the

1950s and 1960s respectively. It is instructive, then, to place the Latin American case materials in the broader context of U.S. policy toward European (Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, Salazar) and Southeast Asian (Dien) dictatorships. General Francisco Franco's transformation from enemy to ally in the context of the U.S. desire to "stabilize" Europe in the post-war period is particularly instructive in this regard.

The obverse of Schmitz's argument is also beneficial. If U.S. policymakers have long supported dictators in the name of democracy, they have also overthrown or opposed democrats and nationalists who would not yield to U.S. demands. Plutarco Elias Calles, perhaps the most conservative Mexican president in the 1920s, was nonetheless described by the State Department as a "much redder bolshevist than Lenin ever was" (50) when he attempted to develop an independent Mexican policy toward Central America. When the United States moved against the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles tortuously argued that "to eradicate these Communist groups [i.e. Arbenz] is not an interference, but an elimination of the interference" (196). Similar arguments have been launched against João Goulart in Brazil, Salvador Allende in Chile, and others.

If it is a relatively straightforward, but worthwhile, task to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the official U.S. insistence that its foreign policy is a fundamentally moral one, underwritten solely by a desire to sponsor democratic development in the world, it is a more difficult assignment to parse out those factors which have inspired policy. This is particularly important for Latin America, an area of the world that the United States has long held in special regard. In this light, while Schmitz's global analytic approach is often an advantage, it can also disrupt what must be seen as the exceptional characteristics of Latin America as an historic sphere of influence for the United States. This point is suggested by Under Secretary of State Robert Olds who opposed Mexican leaders in the 1920s for attempting to "set aside our special relationship in Central America" (50). Schmitz more often argues that U.S. policy was driven by the policymakers' fear of instability and/or communism. Without entering into a chicken-and-egg argument, one should recognize the elements of U.S. policy that separate Europe from Latin America.

U.S. policymakers' recourse to racist arguments to support their policy initiatives in Latin America, convincingly rehearsed in Michael Hunt's *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987) remains breathtaking not just for its persistence but for the fact that certain explanations characteristic of nineteenth century sociology remained embedded in U.S. discourse well into the present century. President Coolidge's ambassador to Mexico ascribed the obstacles in U.S.-Mexican relations to "... an Indian ... hatred of all people not on the reservation," adding "there is very little white blood in the Cabinet."

(49-50) In a statement which recalls Thomas Carlyle's 1848 attack on the former slaves of the Caribbean as lazy freeloaders, the U.S. military attaché in El Salvador argued shortly before an explosion of peasant unrest in 1932 that the United States need not worry about the poor in that country since they "can always get fruit and vegetables" (62). Secretary of State Dean Acheson, professing in 1949 that he was rather "vague" about the "situation in South America" nonetheless suggested that their "problems" stemmed from the "Hispano-Indian culture – or lack of it" (149). And Thomas Mann, perhaps the most influential Latin American policymaker in the 1960s, bragged, "I know my Latinos. They understand only two things – a buck in the pocket and a kick in the ass" (182). The sheer doggedness of racist explanation forces us to examine the roots of Latin American policy in a different light than German policy, for example.

The nature of the "threat" which U.S. policymakers have perceived in Latin America from the time of John Adams to the present has changed over the decades, but not the feeling of "threat" itself. Nineteenth-century "bandits" gave way to twentieth-century "anarchists," "reds" or, currently, "drug-traffickers." (John Foster Dulles told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1954 that "in the old days we used to be able to let South America go through the wringer of bad times...but the trouble is that now, when you put it through the wringer, it comes out red" [195]). At the bottom there remains the argument – best summed up in Monroe's 1823 state of the union address and best understood by examining the various drafts of Monroe's speech as presented to the British – that the United States has long seen Latin America as its own sphere of influence. U.S. policy will support governments that operate in a framework acceptable to Washington (democratic or dictatorial), and oppose governments that operate in a framework unacceptable to Washington (democratic or dictatorial). Thus, those moments which, in Schmitz's analysis, fall outside the general thrust of U.S. policy (Truman's efforts to oust Perón or Franco, or Kennedy's support for democratic regimes in 1961-62), are ultimately not an obstacle to his overall analysis: none of the governments explored during those short periods actually challenged fundamental aspects of U.S. policy in either Latin America or Europe. Indeed, Schmitz summarizes the point quite neatly when referring to Truman's policy toward Vietnam: the United States would prefer to see stable, independent and democratic governments throughout the world ... but where such governments stood in the way of U.S. interests, democracy would give way to a straightforward pursuit of "national" interests.

A few errors or omissions impair this otherwise highly readable and valuable study. José Santos Zelaya's regime ended in 1909, not in the "1920s" (156). The U.S. role in the assassinations of Rafael Trujillo and Ngo Dinh Diem, as disclosed by the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, should have been reviewed.

Yet Schmitz's conclusion calls attention to one important consequence of the consistent U.S. attempt to use "moral arguments and appeals to gain public support" (308) for its foreign initiatives. By opening the discourse of U.S. foreign policy to moral argumentation, this policy remains subject and vulnerable, itself, to moral judgment.

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Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Without the Soviet Union as an alternative model, Latin American nations increasingly imitate the United States. But "Tio Sam" frequently sends mixed messages regarding public policy toward Central and South America. During the Cold War, U.S. decisions proved particularly difficult to decipher. President John F. Kennedy's interrupted administration especially defied easy analysis. In the book, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, Stephen G. Rabe argues that President Kennedy's Latin American relations generated conservative, even reactionary, forces. In dealing with these nations, Kennedy may have allowed anticommunist fervour to override promotion of democracy, constitutionalism, capitalism, and social justice.

Although U.S. resistance to communism initially prompted Kennedy to advocate reform in Latin America, fear of instability inspired ultimate acceptance of military or dictatorial rule. The young president asserted leadership in a global struggle against communist regimes. When several Latin American dictators lost power in the late 1950s, Kennedy encouraged democratic capitalism for these new governments. The young president promoted a balance of free-market principles with progressive taxation and moderate government regulation. Kennedy believed that this "New Deal"-style approach would bring social justice, legitimate and stable regimes, and resistance to communist appeals and insurrections. Excessive apprehension about short-term instability, however, ultimately motivated Kennedy's Latin America policy. According to Rabe, Kennedy favoured pro-United States dictatorial and military governments rather than leftist democratic regimes. Socialist leaders who refused to denounce communism never inspired the confidence of U.S. officials. If the United States could not guarantee a Latin American leader's anticommunist credentials, therefore, Kennedy favoured order rather than democracy, constitutionalism, and decolonization.

In Rabe's interpretation, Kennedy's support for military rulers and counterinsurgency doctrines left a reactionary legacy. To avoid disorder and communist revolution, Kennedy tolerated authoritarian regimes in the Dominican