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# The Anti-Communist Myth

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A critical examination of aggregate U.S. foreign policy analysis of the Cold War

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*Dylan Heyden*

With the exception of being located on the same continent, there are perhaps no two South American countries that are more different than Argentina and Bolivia. Still, in light of their differences it is quite common for scholars to lump the two together along with other South and Central American countries when analyzing U.S. foreign policy pertaining to Latin America. This tendency is most evident in scholarly analysis of the Cold War era that often frames U.S. foreign policy decisions as being exclusively anti-communist.

This paper examines U.S. foreign policy toward Argentina and Bolivia during the presidential administration of Richard Nixon. It postulates that the U.S. support of a coup in Bolivia and lack thereof in Argentina indicate the administration's nuanced approach in foreign policymaking. It also argues that anti-communism was only one of a variety of factors to influence U.S. interventions in the region. This analysis seeks to expand current views on the transitory nature of Richard Nixon's presidency vis-à-vis the Cold War, and the calculative and meticulous nature of the Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger foreign policy-making mechanism. To do so, the first section will provide background information about the issue at hand—aggregated analysis that paints U.S. policy

in Latin America with a broad brush. The second section will explain the historical context of the U.S.-backed coup in Bolivia, and its precursors. The third section will highlight the parallel sociopolitical situation in Argentina and identify a few similarities. The concluding section demonstrates that because the purely anti-communist thesis breaks down in the comparison of just two case studies, nuanced analysis that focuses on individual countries is more apt to explain the variety of factors guiding U.S. foreign policy decisions during the Cold War era.

## BACKGROUND

Argentina and Bolivia occupy the same continent, share an official language—Spanish—but have little else in common. The first, a particularly large country with a culture of tango, *mate*, and strong European roots, takes pride in its heritage of *gauchos de La Pampa* (romanticized “cowboys”), *asados* (barbecues), and contributions to Latin American literature. Argentina has an immense coastline, but its crown jewel is its vibrant capital city, Buenos Aires, which is often referred to as the Paris of South America. Bolivia, on the other hand, is landlocked (and has been since the 19<sup>th</sup> century). This is in some ways analogous to its current geopolitical predicament—being backed into a corner by three major South American players: Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. Bolivia is also smaller both in area and population than most of its neighbors (inhabitants number 10.5 million whereas the Buenos Aires metro area alone boasts 15 million).<sup>1</sup> The ethnic makeup of Bolivia,

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “South America: Bolivia,” *The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bl.html>; Central Intelligence

which is mostly indigenous, is also of stark contrast to the country's paler Argentinian counterparts, and the people's habit of choice is chewing coca leaves or steeping them in a tea as opposed to drinking mate.

In spite of these differences, it is quite common for scholars to focus their analysis of the impacts of U.S. foreign policy on the region—grouping the two countries together along with other South American nations and even Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America. This is especially true in the context of the Cold War. For instance, Peter H. Smith says of the period that:

The United States sought to extend and consolidate its political supremacy throughout the hemisphere. Launching an anticommunist crusade, the United States institutionalized military and political alliances with the nations of the region [and] offered to collaborate with authoritarian regimes so long as they were anticommunist.<sup>2</sup>

He argues, “By the mid 1950s, Washington laid down policy lines that would continue through the 1980s.”<sup>3</sup> Spanning nearly 44 years (1947-1991), any claims about “Latin American” history, or U.S. foreign policy with respect to the region during this time deserve a great deal more nuance. While the Cold War was a period often characterized by monolithic anti-communist foreign policy, U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America was much

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Agency “Country Comparison: GDP - per Capita (PPP),” The World Factbook.

<sup>2</sup> Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

more fluid, and varied from country to country. The goal of the United States for Latin America as early as the mid-1950s, as Smith identifies, was to mitigate the “communist threat”.<sup>4</sup> The strategies of doing so, however, and the value ascribed to this policy depended as much on the global and regional context as on the person sitting in the oval office. Even a blanket statement like the “threat of communism” does not take into consideration the continuum of populist and leftist movements that had to be evaluated by U.S. foreign policy makers for their viability as threats to the United States. Moreover, different U.S. officials would likely describe what constitutes a threat differently.

Shrouded in mystery, due in part to the social peculiarities of both figures, the Nixon-Kissinger relationship with respect to U.S. foreign policy is often represented as quintessentially Cold War. Early in his presidency, Nixon was an anti-communist ideologue with the primary objective of stopping the spread of communism.<sup>5</sup> Kissinger, however, was very much a product of the realist school of thought in international relations and viewed power and its maintenance and protection as being at the core of the pursuit of U.S. interests. It was ultimately Kissinger's realist approach in the calculation of foreign policy that came to heavily influence Nixon.<sup>6</sup> The vision of the duo as manipulative architects, bending international actors to their will for the sake of an anti-communist crusade,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Anti-communism in Twentieth-century America: A Critical History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 144.

<sup>6</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume E-10, eds. Erin Mahan and Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Preface.

though, is overstated—at least insofar as the belief that they were motivated solely by the perception that communism as an ideology was an inherent danger. This is illustrated by the U.S. intervention in Bolivia and lack thereof in Argentina during the Nixon administration.

In both Bolivia and Argentina there existed similar characteristics that would have satisfied the pretexts for intervention if ideology were the primary motivation. However, because the U.S. response to the situations in both countries proved to be more discerning, the “crusade against communism” thesis loses credibility. Instead, it is likely that ideology was not a primary concern. Rather, a confluence of factors influenced Nixon and Kissinger in their decision-making processes including economic interests, U.S. national security, and continued preeminence in the region. Insofar as the rise of popular politicians in Latin America threatened geopolitical order, Nixon-Kissinger policy sought to squash it. When less viable threats were identified, though, there existed more political and ideological liberty for Latin American leaders than many scholars identify.

## PRETEXTS TO THE BANZER REGIME IN BOLIVIA

In April 1971, the United States supported a coup d'état in Bolivia that brought Hugo Banzer to power. The growing revolutionary fervor that justified this intervention in the eyes of the United States began with the non-democratic ascension of René Barrientos Ortuño to the presidency in 1964. He promised to realign Bolivia on the path of revolution that began in 1952 and later fizzled. Barrientos Ortuño believed that the previous 12-year regime of single party rule in the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement

(MNR) had been led astray.<sup>7</sup> While Bolivia's economy greatly benefited from Barrientos' policies, he found few supporters particularly in the rural regions due to his continued efforts to subdue the labor force. After Barrientos' untimely demise in 1969, General Alfredo Ovando Candia, who had been co-president with Barrientos until January 1966, assumed the presidency.<sup>8</sup>

Partially aligning himself with the populist contingent of the increasingly radical public, Ovando sought to end Bolivia's favoritism of the U.S. by nationalizing Gulf Oil Company's holdings. In a memo to the President dated September 26, 1969, Kissinger argued that Ovando's presidency could threaten U.S. interests. In particular he stated that:

Mining and oil investments...will undoubtedly be affected by the change of government. Gulf Oil, which has drawn fire in the Bolivian congress and press, will probably be the first to feel pressure at least in the form of requests for greater share of profits through higher taxes, royalties or creation of mixed companies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis M. Hanratty & Rex A. Hudson, “A Country Study: Bolivia,” *Country Studies*, Library of Congress Federal Research Division, December 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* The official story is that Barrientos died in a helicopter crash, but many of the details are still unknown. There is speculation that his death may have been part of some sort of plot, but this has not been proven.

<sup>9</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume E-10, eds. Erin Mahan and Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 79.

While correctly predicting that Gulf Oil holdings would be compromised by regime change, Kissinger's predictions of potential outcomes proved much less severe. After Ovando elected to nationalize Gulf Oil holdings, Kissinger mentioned in another memo to President Nixon, "nationalization of Gulf, the largest foreign investment, was in many ways a 'revolutionary' symbol and a watershed...The nationalistic elements...moved suddenly."<sup>10</sup> Kissinger's memo expresses concern for U.S. "interests," in this case economic, and also a concern for "revolution" and "nationalism," but neither are directly rooted in the threat of communism. In this way, the origins of what would become the deteriorating political situation in Bolivia were not of ideological concern at the onset. Only insofar as they led to policies in Bolivia that threatened U.S. private interests did Kissinger choose to highlight them.

Over the course of his presidency, Ovando's oscillation between populist and nationalist rhetoric, while in some instances courting the right, further polarized the country and the military. This paved the way for the coup against him and the emergence of José Torres González. Torres was a left-wing general who took an even more aggressive stance against the United States. Although at times, Kissinger alluded to the fact that Torres might have pursued a moderate course with U.S. support, and that members of Torres' cabinet were fairly moderate.<sup>11</sup> During this time, the U.S. pursued a policy of selling tin to Bolivia from the U.S. government's stockpile, which ended indefinitely on

April 9, 1971.<sup>12</sup> Torres' response shortly after was "favorable" according to a note from Kissinger to Nixon. The memo states, "[Torres] said he valued cordial relations with the U.S. 'more than with any other country' and he took your action as a clear sign of the U.S. concern for Bolivia and for its problems."<sup>13</sup> What remains unclear is what later provoked Torres to expel the Peace Corps from Bolivia. Regardless, a transcribed conversation from two months later illustrates Kissinger and Nixon's concerns regarding Bolivia, and potentially orchestrating a coup. The text reads:

(Kissinger): We are having a major problem in Bolivia, too... I've told Karamessines to crank up an operation post-haste...

(Nixon): What does Karamessines think we need? A coup?

(Kissinger): We'll see what we can, whether—in what context. They're going to squeeze us out in another two months. They've already gotten rid of the Peace Corps, which is an asset, but now they want to get rid of USIA and military people...

(Nixon): Remember, we gave those goddamn Bolivians that tin.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 80.

<sup>11</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 95.

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<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 99.

<sup>13</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 101.

Weeks later, the CIA proposed potential covert actions that could be taken by the United States to topple the Torres regime. On August 19, 1971, NSC staffer Arnold Nachmanoff confirmed with Kissinger that opposition forces in the country's capital, La Paz, were well aware of American support of a coup.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Colonel Hugo Banzer, who proved more favorable to U.S. interests, led a coup in August 1971 that resulted in Torres' exile.

In light of all of this, the "dealing with the communist threat" paradigm seems nonexistent. The only mention of communism at all is Ambassador Ernest V. Siracusa's remarks in June 1971 that failure to support opponents of the Torres regime, "might leave the door open for communists to gain yet another foothold in the Americas."<sup>16</sup> Even so, the Ambassador mentions in a later memo that a coup may not be wise either, as the political climate of the situation is unstable, and a successful coup may simply result in the rise of another leftist leader.<sup>17</sup> In spite of this one remark, Nixon and Kissinger's exchanges do not include any mention of communism. Therefore, in the context of Bolivia, the notion of a "communist crusade" is at best a secondary explanation. Compared to more significant U.S. interests like maintaining influential preeminence and the recuperation of financial losses due to the nationalization of various Bolivian industries, anti-communism was a less influential justification for the coup, if at all.

Identifying the similarities and differences between the Bolivian experience during the Nixon

administration and the Argentinian experience until Nixon's resignation in 1974, illuminates the nuances of the Nixon-Kissinger approach to U.S. foreign policy and its break with the traditional understanding of U.S. policy toward the region.

## ARGENTINA: THE 1973 COUP THAT NEVER WAS

Richard Nixon was elected in the U.S. just as the Argentinian Revolution celebrated its third year. The Argentinian president at the time, Juan Carlos Onganía, had come to power after a coup that ousted center-left president Arturo Umberto Illia.<sup>18</sup> The regime proved to be an oppressive one that greatly limited civil liberties. Public approval for Onganía and his successors Roberto Levingston and Alejandro Lanusse, who remained in power until 1973, were at an all-time low. At the same time, the Argentinian political system was significantly impacted by the legacy of former president Juan Domingo Perón.<sup>19</sup>

Perón, who was forced into exile in 1955, served as president of Argentina for two terms (1946-1955).<sup>20</sup> A difficult political figure to categorize in terms of ideology, Perón was known as a president who favored labor groups like the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), but also cited his admiration for the fascist regimes of Europe that fought in World War II. After his numerous political successes, he became a hero among Argentinians in spite of his eighteen years in exile. In fact Argentinians loved him more because of it. In exile, Perón remained an active critic of the military regimes that replaced him and

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<sup>15</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Document 107.

<sup>16</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Document 76a.

<sup>17</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Document 106.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Potash. *The Army & Politics in Argentina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Page. *Perón: A Biography* (NY: Random House, 1983).

continued to build relationships from his temporary home in Franco's Spain. His legacy in Argentina was a new political ideology specific to the country's politics called Peronism.<sup>21</sup> It drew from Peron's ideas to create a "third way" in the Cold War context that avoided the two extremes of capitalism and communism. The nostalgia built around the figure of Perón among Argentinian society is what led organizations like the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP), Montoneros, and People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) to launch radical campaigns in his name against the repressive regimes of the Onganía, Levingston, and Lanusse.<sup>22</sup> These groups resorted to acts of terror as a result of the worsening sociopolitical situation. Peronists were presumed responsible for the bombing of the Sheraton Hotel in Buenos Aires.<sup>23</sup> The Montoneros resorted to similar acts of terror: in 1970 they kidnapped and executed former anti-Peronist president, Pedro Eugenio Aramburu.<sup>24</sup> The ERP was also responsible for waves of bombings and arson attacks in the early 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Perón's degree of connection with these groups remains disputed, but the emergence of these groups is demonstrative of an increasingly radical population during this period.

Perón later returned to Argentina in 1973 after a return to democracy. He was banned from participating in the elections, but his selection for President, Héctor Cámpara won by a sizeable margin. The perspective of the U.S. State

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<sup>21</sup> James P. Brennan, *Peronism and Argentina* (Wilmington, DE: SR, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> "Peronists Blamed in Hotel Bombing," *The Free Lance-Star*, October 17, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> James Ciment, *World Terrorism: An Encyclopedia of Political Violence from Ancient times to the Post-9/11 Era* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 167.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Department on Perón's return is difficult to ascertain as declassified documents end in 1972. A telegram from that year, however, predicts that a triumphant return of Perón would be a positive development for Argentina, even though Perón's ideology influenced the emergence of militant leftist groups.<sup>26</sup> The Nixon administration ultimately did not elect to intervene in Argentina. This idea is a clear demonstration of the administration's nuanced approach in the region.

In Bolivia, for example, Nixon expressed his concerns with guerilla movements that threatened Bolivian stability, so much so that he asked the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) director to look into it further.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, in Argentina with a growing number of insurgent groups, some steeped deeply in Marxist ideology, there exists no mention in declassified State Department documents of the risks to Argentinian security (and therefore U.S. national security and interests) that these groups posed. Within the report that favors the return of Perón, for example, there is no indication as to how Perón's return might affect these groups and their operations. This lack of concern for the militant left in Argentina represents nuanced understanding that although high profile acts of terrorism were occurring, the country was ultimately not at risk of a takeover by the militant left as much as Bolivia. In addition, it represents a careful analysis of the aims of both types of armed militant groups. Those found in Bolivia threatened the country's stability, and were largely led by Che Guevara, who had

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<sup>26</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume E-10, eds. Erin Mahan and Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 76.

<sup>27</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Document 92.

already proven himself a successful commander in the realm of revolutionary uprisings. The FAP, ERP, and Montoneros in Argentina, however, were more likely associated with the fringes of the political system without any potential for complete disruption of the political order and the political system. Indeed, their violent actions were more reactionary than revolutionary.

Additionally, Héctor José Cámpora decided to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba immediately after his election. By this time Cuba was aligned with the Soviet bloc. The United States, however, took no recourse in Argentina. Therefore, it can be assumed that at the very least the U.S. tolerated Campora's move. This supports the claim that the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy mechanism was capable of acknowledging the fact that a country—at limited risk to communist insurgents—could successfully establish a relationship with another country under the Soviet umbrella while remaining outside of the Soviet sphere of influence.

This calls into question the United States' "global crusade against communism" thesis. If the U.S. had been concerned solely with the spread of the ideas of communism throughout Latin America, a different reality would have emerged. The U.S. would have been much less discriminate, eliminating any and all potential communist groups. This kind of indiscriminate squashing across the continent, however, is precisely what did not occur under Nixon. Similarly, a reversal of the proverb "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" to "the friend of my enemy is my enemy" would have been more apropos.<sup>28</sup> As Argentina normalized diplomatic relations with Cuba, the Nixon

administration did not impose this doctrine. In this sense, the blanket of anti-communism and its application as the guiding principle behind all overt and covert foreign policy actions taken by the United States in Latin America—at least during the Nixon administration—has considerably lost steam.

## CONCLUSION

The countries that make up Latin America have understandable similarities, yet this often causes scholars to group the entire region as a single bloc. The reality is each country has its own idiosyncrasies, and U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, as it relates to Latin American countries, illustrates these distinct qualities. In addition to the fact that context is often considered in policymaking, the ways in which foreign policy is enacted also depends on the leadership involved. Looking strictly at one president, Richard Nixon, it has become clear that even within the same larger global context, there were no preordained indicators that would precipitate a certain type of response.

Yet in examining both Bolivia and Argentina, there are some noteworthy similarities in their respective narratives during the Nixon period. For one, Torres and Perón were similar leaders in that their ideologies were complex and could not simply be described as communist, socialist, or Marxist. In some ways this made their behavior unpredictable, particularly in the case of Torres. Second, both countries were in a relative state of sociopolitical turmoil during their respective leaders' times in power (in this case after Perón's exile). Finally, both exhibited some degree of repudiation for the United States. In the case of Torres, this manifested itself through his expulsion of the Peace Corps and nationalization of

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<sup>28</sup> Kaṭalya & L. N. Rangarajan. *The Arthashastra* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992).

different assets. With Perón, this was expressed through an adherence to a “third way” foreign policy by seeking to forge a nonalignment path between the U.S. and Soviet Union. The result in both countries, however, was entirely different; in Bolivia the U.S. orchestrated a coup, and in Argentina the U.S. pursued a policy of economic assistance.

The specific rationale that lies behind each of these decisions is cryptically represented in declassified correspondence between Nixon and Kissinger, but what the discrepancy indicates is that U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America during the Nixon administration was more fluid than is typically understood in scholarship. In addition, what is commonly thought to be the unitary thread in all foreign policy decisions during the Cold War, the specter of communism, did not play a significant role in the United States’ decision to act in Bolivia or not to act in Argentina. Instead, it was a confluence of factors. These examples demonstrate the calculated nature of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy agenda. By separating just two countries that are often analyzed as components of the Latin American bloc, more detailed and complex insights begin to take shape. This is indicative of one of the many pitfalls of aggregate foreign policy analysis—that is characterizing U.S. foreign policy as being consistent toward certain regional, economic, or ideological groupings. The fact is this form of grouping lacks the sort of local context required to understand the intricate nature of the U.S. foreign policy making mechanism.

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**DYLAN HEYDEN is a first year M.A. student in International Relations. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of San Diego in 2013, with a B.A. in International Relations & Spanish. Some of his prior research experiences include working for the University of San Diego's Trans-Border Institute analyzing rule of law in Mexico and U.S.-Mexico relations, and traveling to Nicaragua as a USD Changemaker Scholar to pursue his senior thesis.**