



## From Promoting Political Polyarchy to Defeating Participatory Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy towards the Far Left in Latin America

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### Abstract

*During the 1980s, the United States initiated an explicit policy of democracy promotion throughout the world. William Robinson (1996) more accurately described this initiative as “promoting polyarchy,” whereby the United States supported moderate elite actors that promoted neoliberal economic policies to displace both right-wing and communist despots, such as General Augusto Pinochet in Chile and Soviet rulers in Eastern Europe. While much of Latin America remained characterized by polyarchies throughout the late 20th Century, Latin American citizens began to reject these political arrangements and to elect anti-neoliberal candidates that promoted participatory democracy by the turn of the 21st Century, particularly in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. How has the United States changed its democracy promotion strategies to respond to these new dynamics? The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the U.S. government, through agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and USAID, has altered the main thrust of its foreign policy in Latin America, from promoting polyarchy and displacing despotic leaders, to supporting opposition actors to unseat democratically-elected far leftist leaders that promote participatory democracy. This paper deploys a case study method involving recent U.S. foreign policy in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and it utilizes both U.S. diplomatic cables and interviews with U.S. state elites to illustrate this shift.*

**Keywords:** U.S. Empire; imperialism; democracy; Latin America; Venezuela

Social scientists, journalists, and politicians all recognize the contemporary existence of the U.S. Empire (Bacevich 2002; Go 2011; Mann 2013; Nye 2015; Steinmetz 2005). They recognize, first and foremost, that while the U.S. Empire does not currently pursue territorial forms of empire such



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as colonialism, it still attempts to control political-economic processes throughout the world in a non-territorial manner. The United States has, for example, invaded countries, funded guerilla insurgents to depose particular governments, supported political parties that it would prefer to see in power, and utilized economic leverage within international financial institutions, among other measures, in attempts to induce change across the world.

Several disputes within the social sciences persist, though, concerning the nature of U.S. global power. While many world-systems theorists, for instance, understand U.S. hegemony as gradually diminishing (Arrighi and Silver 1999; Boswell 2005; Go 2011; Hung 2017; Wallerstein 2003), other social scientists view U.S. global power as relatively stable and generally unchanging for the foreseeable future (Harvey 2003; Mann 2013; Wood 2003; Steinmetz 2005). The basic conjecture that the United States now commands a global empire, however, does not elicit much controversy among social scientists.<sup>1</sup> They generally draw attention to a host of dimensions wherein the United States maintains a disproportionate amount of power in comparison with its nearest international competitors. For example, it continues to maintain the world's largest proportion of global GDP, and it continues to possess the world's most extensive and most powerful military force.

Despite the extent of U.S. global power, many countries have sought to challenge its dominance. In the decades following World War II, for example, communist governments and insurgents who sought to undermine U.S. global power developed on nearly every continent. In response, the United States directly intervened and/or supported military interventions in a number of countries, including, for example, Cambodia, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Korea, and Vietnam. U.S. national security interests, of course, justified these endeavors during the Cold War period (Grandin 2006; Mann 2013). Some social scientists, however, have understood these justifications as merely cover for ensuring that foreign governments respect U.S. corporate interests within their domestic confines (Burron 2013; Robinson 1996).

During the Cold War, the United States generally succeeded in deposing left-leaning governments in Latin America, that is, with the exception of Cuba. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower permitted CIA forces to work alongside dissident Guatemalan military officers to overthrow of the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, and President

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<sup>1</sup> Dispute also persists among social scientists concerning who or what groups the U.S. Empire ultimately represents. William Robinson, Leslie Sklair, and other theorists of global capitalism assert that the U.S. represents the interests of a transnational capitalist class, rather than U.S. state interests. World-systems theorists, however, assert that U.S. state elites still remain interested in their own economic, security, and territorial interests. Julian Go (2011), for instance, has asserted that the United States has entered into more foreign military endeavors in the last few decades in an effort to bolster its global power amid economic decline. He argues that an inverse relationship exists between U.S. economic decline and U.S. military aggression. For a more detailed look at sociological theorizing on U.S. imperial motivations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, see Gill (2018).

Richard Nixon allowed the CIA to provide logistical and technical support to Chilean military dissidents as they planned a coup d'état against the democratically-elected Chilean President Salvador Allende (Grandin 2006; Sikkink 2007). Although President John F. Kennedy and subsequent presidents failed to unseat the Cuban communists, this became the exception that proved the rule in Latin America for much of the Cold War: the United States would successfully support right-wing counter-revolutionaries and, for a time, seemingly stable dictatorships.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980s, the United States somewhat strangely shifted its foreign policy approach towards Latin America, among other regions of the world. Instead of directly supporting right-wing authoritarian leaders, U.S. elites began to cultivate moderate political actors that would promote neoliberal economic policies and embrace U.S. national security interests. In doing so, the United States promoted a transition towards a democratic model that would allow these moderate actors the ability to succeed at the polls. In Chile, for instance, the U.S. government gradually reduced support for General Augusto Pinochet, criticized his style of rule, and funded moderate political parties that eventually took power following a democratic transition.

William Robinson (1996), and others who have taken influence from his work, have more accurately described this U.S. strategy involving democracy promotion as “promoting polyarchy.” That is, instead of championing dictatorial regimes, they argue that the United States promotes a limited form of democracy wherein moderate elite actors who embrace the United States and its policies win electoral contests. Robinson (1996) and others have demonstrated how the United States funneled much funding and support towards particular moderate groups so they might electorally compete best at the polls and usher in a limited democratic model.

Much has changed, though, since the end of the Cold War. While Latin American citizens indeed initially supported many moderate political candidates that received U.S. backing and promoted neoliberal policies, they began to reject these leaders and their policies by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ellner 2008; Silva 2009; Stahler-Sholk et al 2008). In response to the failures of neoliberalism, grassroots social movements in many places throughout Latin America sprung up and began to emphasize the idea of participatory democracy, the redistribution of wealth, and a rejection of U.S. imperial power (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Silva 2009; Smilde 2011; Stahler-Sholk et al 2008). In 1998, for instance, Venezuelans elected former President Hugo Chávez, who ran on a platform that criticized neoliberal capitalist policies and U.S. hegemony, and prioritized the idea of rewriting the Venezuelan Constitution to emphasize the idea of participatory democracy (Smilde 2011). In the years that followed, Chávez endorsed a socialist style of governance, funded the extensive creation of democratic community councils and communes, criticized the U.S. War

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<sup>2</sup> The U.S. found less success in Asia, where communists still continue to rule, at least in name, in China, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

on Terror, aligned with several U.S. enemies, and led efforts to create regional bodies that deliberately excluded the United States (Corrales and Romero 2013; Ellner 2008; Smilde and Gill 2013). In 2005, Bolivians elected Evo Morales, an indigenous peasant leader, who also lambasted U.S. foreign policy, championed participatory democratic measures, and rejected neoliberal economics. And in the following year, Ecuadoreans and Nicaraguans respectively elected Presidents Rafael Correa and Daniel Ortega—two equally incisive leaders who recurrently condemned the United States and its policies within Latin America. How has U.S. foreign policy—particularly U.S. democracy promotion programs—responded to this shifting terrain in Latin America?

Instead of consolidating nascent democracies and funding political parties to contest right-wing authoritarian actors, the U.S. government has sought to bolster political parties and NGOs that now contest democratically-elected leftist governments that encourage participatory democratic reform. In this paper, I illustrate how the United States attempted to destabilize far-left governments in Latin America through diplomatic measures and direct support for opposition groups. This strategy harkens back to U.S. foreign policy as it was largely conceived during the Cold War: directly challenging far left governments throughout the region that were democratically elected.

In this paper, I draw attention to three particular instances of U.S. foreign policy towards far left, Latin American governments: Venezuela under Chávez (1999-2013), Bolivia under Morales (2006-present), and Nicaragua under Ortega (2007-present). Under the guise of promoting democracy, the United States has largely worked through the quasi-governmental National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). I show that individuals within these organizations actively worked alongside U.S. state elites to destabilize these far left governments. To do so, they financed and provided technical support to opposition political parties and opposition NGOs, and, in some instances, U.S. state elites directly threatened far left leaders with reprisal. While the U.S. government formerly funded groups in order to push out despotic governments and, thereafter, funded programs designed to consolidate existing democracies, it now utilizes its “democracy promotion” strategies, in part, to destabilize far leftist leaders that have received the electoral support of their populace. In these locations, the United States does not work to strengthen existing democratic institutions, but rather assists preferred parties in their bid to occupy existing political institutions.

### **U.S. Empire, Democracy Promotion, and the Rise of the Left in Latin America**

Social scientists generally link the rise of the U.S. Empire to the consequences that befell the world following World War II (Go 2011; Mann 2013; Nye 2015). The war decimated European industry,

spread European military forces too thin, and ultimately paved way for a final wave of anti-colonial revolution throughout the Global South. The United States, on the other hand, hosted no warfare with the exception of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. As a result, U.S. industry increasingly supplied products throughout the world, and, what is more, provided Western European governments with economic aid packages so they might rebuild their national industries and stifle any communist movements that developed, such as in Greece and Italy.

As the lone global empire, the United States utilized an array of strategies to maintain its dominant position. However, unlike former European colonial powers, it did not primarily rely upon strategies of colonialism. Julian Go (2008) has shown that this was not due to some form of American exceptionalism whereby U.S. leaders eschewed exercising colonial domination and simply possessed more benevolence than their European counterparts. The United States, in fact, colonized several territories, for example, following the Spanish-American War in 1898, including Cuba and Guam. Following World War II, though, Go (2008) has shown how an anti-colonial consciousness diffused throughout the Global South, and, in many parts, the USSR had encouraged anti-colonial revolution. As a result, the U.S. government recognized that if it did not also champion these movements, newly independent governments would align with the USSR. Given East-West Cold War dynamics, the United States could not allow this and sought allies wherever it could.

Instead of a formal form of empire then, the United States has utilized other, non-territorial tactics in an attempt to maintain global domination. This has involved hard power approaches, including military invasion and support for military overthrows, and it has involved less violent, soft power tactics, such as providing particular political parties with financial and material resources so they might electorally outcompete other parties (Mann 2013; Nye 2015; Robinson 1996). The United States has assuredly utilized the former sorts of strategies all throughout the world, including, for example, its invasions of Korea in 1950, the Dominican Republic in 1965, and Panama in 1989. And where it has not directly intervened, it has supported violent forces that have colluded to overthrow democratically elected governments, such as in Iran in 1953 and Chile in 1973.

As the Cold War has ended and the world has moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, U.S. invasions have not entirely disappeared. As we have seen following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the United States invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, and initiated a Global War on Terror that has involved drone warfare in additional countries, including Somalia, Pakistan, and Yemen. However, it has begun to use additional sorts of foreign policy machinery in order to effect the changes it desires throughout the world, and these sorts of changes have primarily been deployed by U.S. democracy promoting agencies.

Since the 1980s, U.S. state leaders have developed several agencies specifically charged with promoting democracy throughout the world. In 1982, the Reagan Administration created the National Endowment for Democracy and several associated groups, including the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). While the administration asserted that they wanted to ideologically combat communist totalitarianism and promote democracy, others have pointed out that the U.S. foreign policy establishment sought more stable alternatives to the dictatorships that they once propped up throughout the Global South (Burron 2013; Petras 1997; Robinson 1996). William Robinson (1996), for instance, argues that the revolutions that transpired and the revolutionary movements that subsequently developed throughout the late 1970s and 1980s alarmed U.S. foreign policy elites. The success of some of these movements, particularly in Cuba and thereafter Iran and Nicaragua, led state leaders to reconsider their foreign policy approach to the Global South. Instead of dictatorship then, Robinson (1996) argues that U.S. state leaders decided to promote low-intensity forms of democracy – or political polyarchies – that were managed by moderate, domestic elites. These elites would receive funding from the United States through agencies like the NED and its associated groups, and champion U.S. economic and national security interests, including support for neoliberal economic policies and rejecting U.S. adversaries.

Several agencies within the U.S. state also began to promote democracy in addition to the NED and its associated groups. While the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was initially established in 1961 to provide economic aid, it now also provides political aid throughout many parts of the world. USAID explicitly states that it is engaged in helping “countries transition to democracy and strengthen democratic institutions, capitalizing on critical moments to expand freedom and opportunity” (USAID 2017). It has also established an additional internal group that promotes democracy in war-torn and highly unstable areas of the world: the Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI). OTI’s expressed purpose is to assist countries “transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, from violence to peace, or following a fragile peace” by providing “fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs” (OTI 2017). Yet, as I discuss below, the OTI operated within Venezuela for several years, despite the absence of any sort of civil war. And, finally, the Department of State now explicitly promotes democracy through its Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). DRL, however, has shrouded its recipients more intensely than the other two organizations, which have worked with some researchers to release some of their internal documents concerning their democracy promotion practices.

Indeed, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many moderate elites across Latin America, who promoted neoliberal economic policies and assumed the same foreign policy positions as the United States, came to power. This included individuals like Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela,

Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia, among many other Latin American leaders, who actively worked with international financial institutions, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to implement neoliberal policies (Harvey 2003; Robinson 2009; Rojas 2017; Silva 2009). Despite the promises of neoliberal economic policy, though, inequality and unemployment intensified across Latin America, as the region continued to remain the most unequal area of the world.

Citizens and social movement organizations unsurprisingly began to question the utility of neoliberal economic policies, limited forms of liberal democracy, and the political leaders that embraced these ideas. All across Latin America, protests and riots emerged. In 1989, for instance, after former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez slashed energy subsidies for public transportation at the behest of the IMF and costs for commuters rose, citizens spontaneously engaged in rioting and looting throughout several cities in the country, including the capital Caracas. Military and police responded by firing upon and killing hundreds of citizens in an event that became known as the *El Caracazo*. Given these physically and financially violent events, the stage became set for new political actors to enter the political scene and embody the anti-neoliberal aspirations of the populace. The title of George Ciccariello-Maher's (2013) recent work on the grassroots forces behind the electoral success of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a political candidate who initially ran on an anti-neoliberal platform, testifies to the groundwork Latin American citizens laid for anti-neoliberal leaders: *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*. In this work, Ciccariello-Maher (2013) shows how neighborhood organizations developed throughout the poor barrios of Venezuela, most notably 23 de Enero, which encouraged participatory democratic change and socialist economic policies. He argues that these groups formed the basis for Chávez's success.

Hugo Chávez indeed became the first political candidate elected in Latin America that ran on a platform that encouraged participatory democracy and anti-neoliberal ideas (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Ellner 2008; Smilde 2011). Instead of citizens idly casting votes in periodic elections, Chávez and his grassroots supporters began to conceive of a new form of democracy that would place citizens and their ideas at the forefront of democratic processes. The Venezuelan government, for instance, eventually promoted the idea of communal councils and communes throughout the country, wherein local citizens would determine how to spend government funding, rather than government elites making these decisions. The government also promoted the idea of worker cooperatives that might produce the materials that citizens require for their daily living, which has included everything from food to cement blocks (Ciccariello-Maher 2016). By 2005, Chávez also came to openly endorse the idea of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism, an initiative designed to combat capitalist production, and, indeed, these conceptions have continued to theoretically drive

Venezuelan government policy into the present under Chávez's successor, President Nicolás Maduro.

With inspiration from Venezuela, several other anti-neoliberal, Latin American candidates also began to find success at the polls with backing from grassroots groups opposed to neoliberal economic policies, including Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007), and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2007). Elsewhere in Latin America, other progressive candidates rose to power, including Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil (2003) and José Mujica in Uruguay (2010). However, Chávez, Morales, Correa, and Ortega became the most vocal critics of U.S. imperialism and neoliberal economic policies, while other regional progressives were not nearly as provocative in both their rhetoric and policy (Rojas 2017). These four leaders most enthusiastically pursued participatory democratic reforms, socialist economic policies, and a rejection of U.S. hegemony around the region.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, these four leaders are understood as the far left in Latin America, in comparison with other progressive leaders.

Given that these far leftist Latin American leaders directly challenged the United States by criticizing both U.S. economic and security policies, how did the U.S. government respond to these leaders, particularly through its democracy promoting agencies? The remainder of this paper addresses this question by examining U.S. foreign policy, particularly U.S. democracy promotion strategies, in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. I begin with Venezuela and the Chávez government, given that Chávez became the first democratically elected, far left president in a wave of candidates. Thereafter, I discuss dynamics in Bolivia and Nicaragua.

### Methods

This paper utilizes three particular case studies involving U.S. democracy promotion strategies towards three far left governments in contemporary Latin America: Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. In doing so, the aim of the paper is to illustrate how the United States has responded to the far left – that is, not the U.S. response to Latin American progressives or Latin American leaders more generally. Rather, the focus remains on those Latin American governments that have embraced the most radical positions on the leftist end of the political spectrum. These governments have embraced socialist policies, participatory democratic reforms, and explicitly rejected U.S. influence around the hemisphere.

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that although these governments rejected neoliberal economic policies and pursued participatory democratic and socialist alternatives, that they never fully disconnected from the neoliberal world-system or entirely upended the capitalist mode of production within their countries. The Venezuelan government, for instance, continues to remain reliant upon its oil industry, and that reliance has largely generated the serious economic problems the country is witnessing today. Some scholars have also criticized the Bolivian government, for example, for not fully enhancing its social welfare programs; for maintaining connections with domestic elites; and for continuing to rely upon its energy resources, above all else (Kaup 2012; Webber 2013).

The data for each of these case studies comes from un-redacted U.S. diplomatic cables drafted by U.S. state elites, and, in the case study involving Venezuela, interviews that I conducted with U.S. state elites who directly dealt with issues involving foreign policy towards Venezuela under Chávez. In terms of the latter data, I interviewed 18 individuals from the U.S. foreign policymaking community in a number of locations, including Caracas, Venezuela; Washington, D.C.; and over Skype/telephone. This included individuals who had worked for U.S. democracy promoting agencies, like the NED and USAID, as well as U.S. diplomats, such as former ambassadors and members of the U.S. Department of State. In order to access these individuals, I relied upon initial contacts I developed within Venezuelan civil society and from there I largely utilized a snowball sample, asking those that I interviewed for suggestions on who I might also contact to discuss issues related to U.S. foreign policy in Venezuela during the years of Chávez. Thereafter, I coded these interviews for thematic content, including how individuals interacted with Venezuelan government members, how they sought to promote democracy in Venezuela, what groups received support, and their understandings of the Venezuelan government and their political-economic practices, among other topics.

Sections on Bolivia and Nicaragua, in addition to Venezuela, primarily involve the use of U.S. diplomatic cables that detail U.S. foreign policy and democracy promotion efforts within these countries in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Private Chelsea Manning initially secured these documents and then released them in 2010, where they found a home within the online PlusD Database, where browsers may access them. Cables each emerge from respective U.S. embassies stationed all throughout the world, which allows researchers to intensively map out U.S. foreign policy approaches in many different countries. These cables primarily emerged from U.S. embassies located in Caracas, Venezuela; La Paz, Bolivia; and Managua, Nicaragua.

The PlusD Database possesses a user-friendly search function that allows the user to easily sift through tens of thousands of diplomatic cables. Most importantly for this project, users may filter for time frame and countries of origin. In doing so, users and researchers can easily narrow their search and uncover only those cables that they wish to look through. In addition, the database contains the ability to search for specific terms. This functionality was particularly helpful for this project, because it allowed searches for terms associated with U.S. democracy promotion policies. Given that these policies are largely carried out by USAID and the NED and its associated groups, cables were examined that contain reference to these organizations and their efforts within each respective country. Thereafter, each cable was examined for thematic content, and cables were identified that detailed particular U.S. aims within each respective country. Through the use of these cables, one can piece together the main thrust of these democracy promoting organizations' endeavors in each particular country under analysis.

## Three Case Studies of U.S.-Latin American Foreign Policy: Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua

### Venezuela

Aside from Cuba, no other country has provided the United States with a more direct challenge in recent years than the Venezuelan government under former President Hugo Chávez and now his successor, President Nicolás Maduro. Within interviews with the author, Washington insiders assert that the first serious issue that arose between the United States and Venezuela was Chávez's criticism of the U.S. war in Afghanistan – or, more abstractly, his direct challenge of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. national security interests. On his weekly television program, *Álo Presidente*, President Chávez held up pictures of dead Afghan children and lambasted U.S. bombings. The one event, though, that quite clearly altered U.S.-Venezuela relations was the 2002 coup d'état led by dissident military officers and opposition activists (Ellner 2008). In April 2002, opposition leaders arranged protests that were rerouted towards the presidential palace in Caracas. At the time, supporters of Chávez were also marching near the palace, and, when the two sides came into close proximity, violence ensued, resulting in deaths on both sides.

Soon after violence erupted, dissident members of the Venezuelan military called upon Chávez to step down and, should he not, Air Force members threatened to bomb the presidential palace. While Chávez allowed military members to arrest and relocate him to a military base, he never resigned. In the meanwhile, opposition members stormed the National Assembly (AN) and swore in Pedro Carmona, the President of the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce, as president. Carmona disbanded the AN and the federal judiciary, and suspended the Constitution. Outside the palace, news reached Chávez's supporters in the poor neighborhoods that he had not yet resigned and all of these efforts amounted to an undemocratic and unconstitutional coup d'état. His supporters swarmed the presidential palace and nearby streets, demanding his return, and soldiers who remained loyal to the democratically elected government occupied the presidential palace, eventually pushing the transitional government out.

In the aftermath of the coup, Chávez blamed the United States for conspiring with the opposition to overthrow him, as a result of his embrace of participatory democracy, rejection of neoliberalism, and criticism of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government acknowledged that some of its funding went to individuals that participated in and supported the coup and transitional government, but it claimed that it always shot down any suggestions of supporting a coup and even informed Chávez when those plots arose (OIG 2002). Nonetheless, these events solidified an extensive deterioration in relations between the two countries (Beeton et al 2015; Clement 2005). In the ensuing years, Chávez solidified his anti-U.S. tendencies by aligning with anti-U.S. countries, such as Belarus, China, Iran, and Russia (Gill 2016). Chávez recurrently lambasted the

U.S. Empire and threatened to cut off oil supplies. While the oil continued to flow, Chávez expelled former U.S. ambassador Patrick Duddy, and, when the Senate confirmed Larry Palmer as a new ambassador, Chávez rejected him. Into the present, the two countries continue to lack ambassadors within their respective countries.

Only the complete release of U.S. state documents will, of course, show whether U.S. agencies actively supported the coup. The Bush Administration, however, quickly blamed the violence on Chávez and recognized the transitional government. By contrast, nearly all other governments in the region rejected the constitutionality of the Carmona government. George Folsom, the president of the International Republican Institute (IRI), a democracy promoting agency affiliated with the U.S. Republican Party that receives funding from the U.S. Congress primarily through the NED, also applauded the coup efforts as an exercise of democracy and welcomed the transitional government (Clement 2005).

While the IRI president applauded the 2002 coup, how did the U.S. democracy promotion community writ large respond to Chávez during his rule? It is clear that throughout Chávez's time in office, U.S. democracy-promoting agencies and U.S. diplomats continuously supported opposition political parties so that they might outcompete Chávez and allies at the ballot box. Diplomatic cables from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas reveal that high-ranking diplomats recurrently met with leaders from opposition parties to provide them with guidance on how they might proceed at particular points in time. Following the 2002 coup efforts, for instance, the Venezuelan opposition sought to recall President Chávez from office by collecting signatures and then proceeding to a recall election.

During this recall period, the U.S. ambassador hosted opposition leaders for dinner on several occasions alongside additional U.S. diplomats. On one occasion, U.S. Ambassador Charles Shapiro hosted the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs' Deputy Assistant Secretary Peter DeShazo and invited several opposition leaders to dinner, including leaders from opposition parties Primero Justicia (Julio Borges), Acción Democrática (Henry Ramos Allup), and Proyecto Venezuela (Henrique Salas Romer). At this meeting, DeShazo advised the opposition party leaders that their "their negative sniping ... was perceived as counterproductive and that they were seen as lacking a unified, positive message" (Cablegate 01/27/2004). And in "a sustained aside conversation with [Acción Democrática] leader Henry Ramos," DeShazo told Ramos that for "the opposition to be effective, it needed to reach out to public opinion with a coordinated, coherent, and positive public message, put forward a program or plan of action, and reach out not only to oppositionists but also to independents and chavistas" (Cablegate 01/27/2004). Indeed, within several interviews with the author, former high-ranking diplomats, including one ambassador, stationed within the U.S. Embassy in Caracas revealed that they routinely encouraged the

opposition to unify around one particular candidate to effectively compete against Chávez, rather than splitting their vote among several presidential candidates.

For its part, USAID – the U.S.’s primary agent of democracy promotion – maintained an explicit strategy of pulling supporters away from Chávez and pushing them towards the opposition. To do so, USAID established an OTI office in Caracas. The OTI alongside a private agency named Development Alternatives Inc. (DAI), who received \$8.4 million from USAID for Venezuelan-related projects in 2008 alone,<sup>4</sup> established programs and organizations within several poor neighborhoods to reach supporters of Chávez and encourage them to join the opposition. They attempted to illustrate the democratic shortcomings of the Chávez government and show how the opposition actually embodied democratic ideals. In interviews with the author, DAI representatives, for instance, revealed how they helped opposition activists establish seemingly neutral organizations in poor neighborhoods. Thereafter, DAI representatives supplied these groups with anti-Chávez literature and encouraged support for the opposition through a number of public events. DAI representatives asserted that they promoted liberal democratic ideas and condemned the radical democratic and socialist ideas of the Chávez government.

When these efforts failed to eliminate support for Chávez, the OTI and DAI prioritized support for student groups that were intensively protesting against the Chávez government. Within interviews with members from both the OTI and DAI, individuals revealed that the U.S. government supplied student groups with logistical and technical support, that is, while they protested against Chávez and his policies. And, in fact, when the Venezuelan government opened an investigation into DAI in 2009, Eduardo Fernandez, DAI’s Chief of Party, “told [Deputy Chief of Mission John] Caulfield that he believed the [Venezuelan police’s] dual objective [was] to obtain information regarding DAI’s grantees and to cut off their funding. Fernandez said that ‘the streets are hot,’ referring to growing protests against Chavez’s efforts to consolidate power, and ‘all these people (organizing the protests) are our grantees’” (Cablegate 08/27/2009). In response, DAI quickly destroyed their files and left the country, recognizing that they had indeed provided funding and technical support for those political actors that were directly challenging the Chávez government in the streets of Venezuela.

In addition to USAID, the IRI, that is, one of the NED’s associated groups, also supported opposition parties (Cole 2007; IRI 2001). From 2001 until, at least, 2006, the IRI held seminars and retreats throughout Venezuela in order to provide opposition political party leaders and activists with guidance on how to build their parties, attract supporters, engage with the media,

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<sup>4</sup> DAI was the largest recipient of USAID contract funding in Venezuela in each year, from 2002 until its closure in 2009. The group entered the country initially following the 2002 coup. This has led to some speculation that the United States might have initially sought to depose Chávez through violent means, only later prioritizing a policy of democracy promotion to unseat him.

and construct party platforms (Clement 2005). During these seminars, IRI representatives sponsored Republican Party leaders to visit the country. On one occasion, the IRI sponsored George Fondren, the former College Republican National Committee's field director and then-Executive Director of the Mississippi Republican Party, to visit, and, on another occasion, the IRI brought former Republican Party press secretary Mike Collins into the country to lead seminars with opposition political party leaders (Clement 2005). During Fondren's visit, for instance, IRI leaders organized a roundtable forum for opposition leaders, including leaders from Acción Democrática, COPEI, and Primero Justicia. The forum centered on party leaders working out personal rivalries in order to create "a common vision for the country" (IRI 2001: 4). IRI leaders believed that it would serve the opposition well if they could work out their rivalries and put forward a common solution to the dilemmas confronting Venezuela. In addition, they asserted that the purpose of the roundtable was not solely to condemn Chávez, "but to create a framework allowing the parties to work together and discuss future challenges" (IRI 2001: 4-5). In the end, the IRI pointed out that they would provide technical assistance to the opposition, but "the parties themselves must take certain initiatives for such efforts to be truly effective" (IRI 2001: 5). Despite this, one individual who helped to run IRI seminars during this time told me that the ultimate purpose of these efforts was the help the opposition "get [their] shit together, so they could defeat Chávez."

These sorts of initiatives continued at least until the lead-up to the 2006 presidential elections. In 2006, the IRI supported the opposition presidential candidate, Manuel Rosales, former governor of Zulia state. Within an embassy cable from December 2006, then-Ambassador William Brownfield revealed that the IRI "brought in five technical specialists to assist the Rosales campaign" (Cablegate 12/04/2006).

In the end, we thus see a consistent pattern of U.S. support for opposition politicians for a greater part of the time Chávez maintained the Venezuelan presidency. This support was carried out by U.S. "democracy promoting" agencies, including USAID and the NED and its associated groups, and they openly worked with opposition parties and opposition activists to challenge Chávez both at the ballot box and on the streets of Venezuela.

## **Bolivia**

Following the election of Hugo Chávez, several other left-leaning leaders won elections throughout Latin America, as discussed in the sections above. In Bolivia, indigenous-led protests around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century led to the displacement of two presidents who had promoted neoliberal economic reforms (Kaup 2012; Webber 2013). These reforms included the privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises – including water—and deep social spending cuts. In response, indigenous and rural peasant groups demanded that the Bolivian government change its course,

implement participatory democratic reforms, and ensure citizen access to the fruits of their country's natural resources.

As a result of these protests and a newly strengthened left-indigenous consciousness, Bolivians elected indigenous leader Evo Morales, a congressional member and leader of the Movement for Socialism (MAS). Morales became the first indigenous individual to occupy the presidency of Bolivia. While Morales won 54% of the vote in 2005, he garnered an enormous 64% of the vote in 2009, and continues to govern into the present. Like Chávez, Morales has continually ran on a platform promising to address socio-economic inequality, which has disproportionately affected indigenous members of Bolivian society, and to pursue participatory democratic reforms, including worker cooperatives, direct government transfers, and local councils. Morales has also lambasted neoliberal economic policies and promoted greater intervention into the economy, particularly within the energy and minerals sectors.

U.S. antipathy towards the Morales government commenced shortly after his presidential victory. In their first post-electoral meeting, President Morales told the U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia, David Greenlee, that Bolivia preferred working relations with the United States, but the country would seek an alternative to the neoliberal economic model that the U.S. government promoted in the region. Ambassador Greenlee congratulated President Morales on his victory, but drew attention to Morales' promotion of Bolivian indigeneity and "remark[ed] that the term 'indigenous President' was in our view misleading and narrow" (CableGate 01/03/2006). In addition, after President Morales had pronounced Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's name as *Condolencia* (meaning condolence in Spanish) on a television program, the ambassador "suggested that Morales practice pronouncing the Secretary's name correctly" (CableGate 01/03/2006).

What is more, during this initial meeting with President Morales, Ambassador Greenlee quite plainly threatened the new Bolivian government with reprisal. Greenlee showed "a series of slides prepared by USAID-Bolivia" to Morales and his Vice-President, Álvaro García Linera, and, in doing so, he attempted to show "the crucial importance of U.S. contributions to key international financial [institutions] on which Bolivia depended for assistance, such as the International Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. 'When you think of the IDB, you should think of the U.S.,' the Ambassador said. 'This is not blackmail, it is simple reality'" (CableGate 01/03/2006). Of course, in not so many words, Greenlee, with key assistance from USAID, implied that the United States determined whether or not the Bolivian government would receive international funding from several groups. Following the meeting, several U.S. diplomats stationed in Bolivia met with Joel Branski, the U.S. Resident Representative for the IDB in Bolivia. In a diplomatic cable, Ambassador Greenlee pointed out that Branski was also on board with exerting influence over Bolivia, as "Branski mentioned, U.S. influence over IDB project

approval, fund reallocation, and debt relief provides important leverage to the U.S. in discussions with the incoming” government (Cablegate 1/13/2006).

As U.S. concern with the Bolivian political-economy intensified, particularly following Morales’ decision to nationalize hydrocarbons, Ambassador Greenlee “recommended that [the Department of] State work with Treasury to delay the approval of the funds for Pro Pais” (Cablegate 5/23/2006). Pro Pais involved the allocation of \$23 million from the IDB for job training and infrastructure in Bolivia. What is more, the IDB froze already-allocated funding for pipelines after the Bolivian government nationalized hydrocarbons (Cablegate 7/14/2006). In all these efforts, the United States clearly sought to send a signal to the Bolivian government that they should reconsider their policies and design them with less state intervention into the economy.

Despite these interactions and concerns, though, U.S.-Bolivia relations did not seriously dampen until September 2008. Morales alleged that U.S. Ambassador Phillip Goldberg was supporting opposition movements that were pushing for autonomy in particular regions of the country (Burron 2013, Wolff 2016). Several journalists released documents demonstrating that Goldberg planned and met with members from these opposition movements that were challenging Morales and pushing for autonomy (Burron 2013). In addition, Neil Burron (2013: 124) has asserted that a Fulbright scholar and Peace Corps volunteer “had been asked to spy on Venezuelans and Cubans” within the country. As a result, Morales expelled Goldberg from the country, and the United States reciprocated, removing the Bolivian Ambassador.

As in Venezuela, the United States provided the opposition with technical and financial support through USAID and the NED and its associated groups. And, as in Venezuela, these programs concerned the Morales Administration. USAID programs, in particular, garnered the attention of the Bolivian government. Alexander Main et al (2015) point out that after the election of Morales, USAID redirected their efforts away from the national government and towards regional governments that were largely headed by governors opposed to the new administration. Main et al. (2015: 508) indicate that U.S. diplomats, for example, met and worked with opposition activists that plainly stated they were considering “blowing up gas lines” in order to counteract Bolivian government projects.

USAID funding also flowed to individuals that sought to prevent additional efforts taken by the Morales government. When the Morales government sought to construct a new constitution, for instance, USAID engaged in a concerted effort to fund groups opposed to this process and groups critical of additional MAS government policies. Burron (2013: 126), for instance, reports that while “not all NGOs that received U.S. funding during the constitutional process opposed the MAS, many did.” In response, the Morales administration announced that it would suspend USAID’s democracy programs within the country in July 2008. Most prominently, this suspension affected USAID-funded political party training programs that the IRI and NDI operated throughout

the country, as they also did in Venezuela, in order to support groups opposed to the Morales government. Despite the Bolivian government's decision to terminate these programs, U.S. diplomats sought to push the Bolivian government to reconsider its decision. In doing so, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Bolivia, James Creagan, told the Bolivian Planning and Development Minister Noel Aguirre that this suspension "could result in a Congressional movement to transfer a significant amount of USAID's Bolivia funding to other countries," including the support USAID provided for economic development projects (CableGate 7/10/2009). And so, as a result of Morales' concerns with U.S. democracy promotion efforts and his efforts to combat them, U.S. state elites attempted to utilize the economic leverage they possessed through their economic development programs that USAID also operates. In spite of these threats, Morales finally expelled USAID from Bolivia in 2013.

### **Nicaragua**

During these same years, the United States sought to undermine the electoral prospects of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections, for instance, U.S. foreign policy leaders strategized how they might best confront and combat Ortega's bid for the presidency. Ortega, of course, initially gained international notoriety as a revolutionary leader of the FSLN – or Sandinistas – when the group overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979. Thereafter, Ortega won a presidential election in 1984, but lost to Violetta Chamorro and the UNO Party in 1990. Similar to his style of rule in these earlier years, Ortega continued to criticize U.S. foreign policy efforts in Latin America and asserted that Latin America needed to find more progressive solutions beyond neoliberal economic policies to continued economic problems in the country. Ortega enthusiastically aligned himself with both Chávez and Morales, and the change they represented for the region.

In March 2006, Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon met with several U.S. ambassadors stationed throughout Central America "to outline regional concerns related to populist politics, regional security, nongovernmental diplomacy, immigration, CAFTA-DR implementation, corruption, and regional integration" (Cablegate 04/11/2006). During the meeting, the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, Paul Trivelli articulated his own concerns with candidate Ortega. In an exchange between Trivelli and Shannon, Trivelli stated "that Ortega is the same populist Mafioso who drove Nicaragua into the ground under previous Sandanista [sic] rule" (Cablegate 04/11/2006). Trivelli also articulated concerns regarding Ortega's relationship with Venezuela, stating that an "Ortega victory in upcoming presidential elections would give Chavez a foothold in the region and trigger another round of human and capital flight. A/S Shannon said it is important that neither Ortega nor Aleman [another presidential candidate] win, given Ortega's

influence over Aleman. Leaders in the region must focus on how important these elections are, he added” (Cablegate 04/11/2006).

As high-ranking U.S. diplomats clearly evidenced an anti-Ortega disposition, U.S. democracy promotion agencies worked with several parties so that they might best compete in the 2006 presidential elections. In September 2005 and with funding from the State Department’s Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF), the IRI initiated a party renovation project that would last through September 2006. In doing so, the IRI sought to train “a new generation of qualified political leaders ... for the November 5 elections” (Cablegate 07/11/2006). In doing so, the IRI partnered with a local, private university to provide training for members from four political parties, none of whom were the FSLN.

In addition to the IRI, the local USAID contingent also conveyed to U.S. Embassy staff that they would not like to see an Ortega victory in the 2006 elections. During a meeting between members from these groups and the U.S. Embassy, USAID “personnel were very clear about the dangers of an FSLN victory in the 2006 Presidential elections. A Sandinista win would likely result in capital flight, a setback in open markets, an anti-U.S. foreign policy and an immigration crisis ... For these reasons, timing is crucial for the receipt of election and other financial assistance *to bolster chances for a reform-minded, democratic candidate to win the elections*” (Cablegate 01/05/2006). And so, as in Bolivia and Venezuela, we find high-ranking diplomats and members from both the IRI and USAID all pushing to impede the election of Ortega. Nevertheless, Ortega won the election.

Following these elections, and similar again to Bolivia and Venezuela, democracy promotion efforts clearly continued within the country. The IRI and USAID continued to work, for example, with actors at the local level, as in Bolivia, where the focus shifted from a friendly national government to friendly local governments. In 2007-2008, USAID maintained a program to the tune of \$500,000, designed to “establish and/or develop viable political parties and political entities that are effective and accountable, that represent and respond to citizens interests, and that govern responsibly and effectively” (USAID 2018). Beyond these vague titles, of course, USAID does not publicly detail its program efforts on its websites. This only comes after the years-length delays following Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. However, unless a sea-change in USAID’s approach towards Ortega over the course of a year ensued, we can imagine what sorts of parties were developed or, even more curiously, “established.”

In addition, by 2016, USAID still contracted with Creative Associates, Inc. (CAI) to implement U.S. democracy promotion efforts. CAI now remains infamous for the work it engaged in years earlier in Cuba. While in Cuba, the group carried out clandestine and risky efforts to undermine and ultimately destabilize the Castro government. In 2014, for instance, it was revealed that CAI had recently carried out covert efforts in Cuba to recruit hip-hop artists to the Cuban

opposition, as well as to create a Cuban Twitter application, upon which CAI planned to disseminate anti-Castro messages in an effort to generate public protest of the Castro government (Weaver, *The Guardian* 12/10/2014).

These efforts ultimately failed and thoroughly embarrassed USAID in the wake of their reveal. Indeed, in the end, while it is not entirely clear what CAI has sought to accomplish in Nicaragua, we can plainly see what sorts of activities the group has engaged in elsewhere on far leftist terrain in Latin America. And, it is indeed quite telling that USAID continues to contract with this group even following the 2014 revelations that embarrassed the organization.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

At the end of the Cold War, Robinson (1996) and others demonstrated the imperial capabilities and successes of the United States and its democracy promotion programs throughout Latin America and other parts of the world. Through newly developed organizations including the NED and its associated groups, alongside USAID, the United States sought to shape political-economic outcomes all across globe, including in Chile, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. Other researchers have also illustrated some U.S. success within Eastern Europe, including Georgia and Serbia, shortly following this period (Mitchell 2009; Spoerri 2015). Of course, this success is not in encouraging just any type of democracy, but in championing a particular form of democracy headed by moderate leaders. Robinson (1996) termed this type of limited democracy, a polyarchy, and has pointed out that this was precisely what the United States has promoted abroad.

At a more general level, since at least the Spanish-American War in 1898, Latin America has served as ground zero for U.S. interventionist practices. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States routinely engaged in gunboat diplomacy in a number of locations, including repeated incursions into the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it also supported authoritarian regimes all throughout Central and South America and, on no few occasions, it logistically supported and legitimized several overthrows of democratically elected governments, including in Chile in 1973 and Guatemala in 1954. The United States has also periodically utilized economic coercion in places such as Bolivia, Jamaica, and Venezuela, where it urged governments to implement neoliberal economic policies.

Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, the U.S. government largely began to rely on democracy promotion efforts in order to effect the change it has desired to see throughout the world. It certainly continued to engage in military intervention, such as in Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, but democracy promotion became the U.S. foreign policy establishment's primary institutional preference. The Reagan Administration's consecration of democracy promotion within, for example, the NED itself manifests U.S. state desire to move towards a

seemingly more progressive policy, that is, away from former imperial modalities involving counter-insurgency and, now outdated, anti-communist strategies to contain global challengers. In the early days of U.S. democracy promotion, U.S. state elites contributed to the downfall of several right-wing authoritarians, including Pinochet in Chile and Marcos in the Philippines. Since this time, though, much has changed at the global level.

Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, U.S. democracy promotion efforts have continued throughout the region. Instead of primarily supporting right-wing authoritarian leaders, though, they have also begun to target far-left, Latin American governments that have embraced participatory democratic reform and socialist economic policies. These efforts to unseat the far left in Latin America have intensified over the past two decades. Under these efforts, USAID and the NED, and its associated groups, have poured millions of dollars' worth of resources into political parties and NGOs that have sought to challenge far leftist governments throughout Latin America. In Venezuela, for instance, the United States provided DAI with \$8.4 million in 2008 alone to combat the Chávez government. Yet, despite these efforts, leftist leaders have continued to govern in several countries throughout the region, particularly in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, in addition to several Caribbean nations. This continued reign of leftist leadership throughout the region demonstrates the existence of serious limitations on the U.S. Empire and the ultimate effectiveness of the imperial strategies it has sought to deploy throughout the world. At the end of the day, U.S. imperial efforts are not invincible. Outside of direct military intervention, the success of U.S. imperial efforts remains contingent upon decisions rendered by citizens that inhabit societies abroad. The United States might provide opposition NGOs with a wealth of resources and continue to strategize with opposition political parties throughout the world, but if these parties and NGOs cannot effectively mobilize their respective citizens, U.S. efforts will fail to achieve their ultimate objective: regime change.

Many left-leaning leaders throughout Latin America have received extensive support from their respective citizens. Given the policies implemented by, for example, Presidents Chávez and Morales, this is not surprising. Both Chávez and Morales, for example, successfully nationalized, and, at times, expropriated, industries during an international boom in the price of commodities, such as oil and natural gas. These dynamics enabled these leaders to establish social programs directed at their countries' poorest populations: the working-class, the poor, single mothers, and the indigenous, among other groups. And, regardless of whether one agrees with their styles of rule, their policies generally diminished levels of poverty, diminished levels of inequality, and generated economic growth, albeit not without criticism that they had not moved far enough to combat neoliberal economic policies (Rojas 2017; Webber 2013).

Indeed, it is now only with the ebb of the commodity boom that these leaders have witnessed some setbacks. In Argentina, for example, Mauricio Macri, a neoliberal oriented businessman,

recently won the presidency. And, in Venezuela, President Maduro is now encountering plummeting approval ratings as economic shortages and lengthy queues have arisen alongside declining oil revenue. Two key dynamics have contributed to the recent Venezuelan crisis: an overdependence on oil – leaving the country vulnerable to price fluctuations, and the allocation of foreign exchange for international debt over imports. In addition, the Trump Administration recently forbade U.S. individuals and entities from purchasing any new Venezuelan government bonds. In doing so, it has effectively prohibited the Venezuelan government from restructuring existing debt with U.S. holders, putting the country into a much tighter economic situation. In Ecuador, however, Lenín Moreno, President Correa’s successor, recently defeated Guillermo Lasso, another neoliberal oriented businessman, who, similar to Macri, promised free market reforms after years of state intervention into the economy. Moreno’s victory has provided much needed wind into the sails of the Latin American left amid claims that the pendulum is shifting back towards the Right in Latin America.

In the end, we can surely expect U.S. democracy promotion efforts to continue in the years to come. Despite the Trump Administration’s calls to cut funding for many U.S. state entities, there are as of yet no plans to eliminate democracy assistance programs and/or congressional funding for the NED. What is more, while Trump has praised right-wing authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin in Russia and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, he has recurrently criticized left-wing governments in Cuba and Venezuela. In fact, Trump has even asserted that “a military option” exists to take out the Maduro government. Given these dynamics, we can surely expect U.S. democracy promotion efforts to continue to combat the efforts of far left leaders throughout the region.

The purpose of this paper has been to illustrate how the United States has responded through its democracy promotion agenda to the far left in Latin America at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These far left leaders indeed came to power through the ballot box, and one might have conceivably expected the United States to have worked more productively with these governments, given their democratic credentials and the conclusion of the Cold War. However, given these governments criticism of U.S. imperialism, U.S. foreign policy, and neoliberal policies, and given a lengthy and continuing history of U.S. aggression towards global challengers, productive relations never ensued. Rather, a strained, bitter, and ultimately tragic set of relations unfurled, wherein the United States lost potential allies on select issues and the far left in Latin America has had to allocate extensive energy into neutralizing U.S. influence lest it fail to govern into the future.

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