Collective Defense or Strategic Independence?

Alternative Strategies for the Future

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The Faulty Assumptions of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Third World

Peter J. Schraeder

The United States, although once itself a revolutionary nation fighting against oppression and external control, consistently has failed to understand the growth of this phenomenon in the Third World. This misunderstanding has led to the formulation of ill-conceived U.S. foreign policies in the Third World, making the United States the enemy of social change and protector of the status quo. The purpose of this study is to analyze why the United States habitually has been on the wrong and losing side of social change in the Third World, especially since World War II. It examines the evolution of U.S. foreign policy toward revolutionary regimes, identifies the shortcomings and failures of that policy, and outlines an alternative strategy for the future.

Continuity and Change

A territorially and economically expansionistic United States in the early nineteenth century wanted to limit European influence in "our backyard"—hence the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823—because of fears that Central American revolutions would be "susceptible to outside influences." As rising U.S. economic and political hegemony bore the fruits of the Monroe Doctrine by displacing substantial European interests in Central America, revolutions, and their accompanying economic and political instability, increasingly were viewed as injurious to U.S. interests. "The problem arose when Washington officials repeatedly had to choose which tactic best preserved [U.S.] power and profits: siding with the status quo for at least the short term, or taking a chance on radical change that might (or might not), lead to long term stability." The choice was made clear in 1905 when the United States, through the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, assumed the role of hemispheric policeman to maintain order and stability. Historian Walter LaFeber explains how the Monroe Doctrine had been construed to provide the basis for an antirevolutionary and interventionist foreign policy in Central America:
Monroe and Adams had originally intended it [Monroe Doctrine] to protect Latin American revolutions from outside (that is, European) interference. Eighty years later the power balance had shifted to the United States, and the Doctrine itself shifted to mean that Latin Americans should now be controlled by outside (that is, North American) intervention if necessary. Roosevelt justified such intervention as only an exercise of “police” power, but that term actually allowed U.S. presidents to intervene according to any criteria they were imaginative enough to devise.5

The U.S. role of regional policeman became internationalized as it rose to superpower status at the end of World War II. Most important, U.S. foreign policy became an anticommunist crusade as competition increased with the Soviet Union, the other ascendant superpower to rise out of the ashes of the war. From this point forward, U.S. intervention in the Third World would be driven by hostile perceptions of the Soviet Union.

The Truman Doctrine, built on fears of communism dating back to the Wilson administration, provided the ideological basis for an anticommunist policy of intervention in the Third World. Casting the Greek civil war as a contest between Soviet-supplied communists and Western democratic forces of freedom, Truman, in an address before a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, called upon Americans “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”4 The key thrust of the doctrine was to portray postwar instability as due to Soviet expansion and subversion, thereby legitimizing U.S. economic and military aid to threatened governments. The doctrine marked a watershed in U.S. foreign policy:

For the first time in the postwar era, Americans massively intervened in another nation’s civil war. Intervention was justified on the basis of anticommunism. In the future, Americans would intervene in similar wars for supposedly the same reason and with less happy results.5

Despite the global implications of the Truman Doctrine, its global applicability was still held in question. For example, George F. Kennan's famous “X” article, which provided the philosophical basis of what was to be referred to commonly as containment, was limited to the countries immediately bordering the Soviet Union, especially Western Europe. Kennan implied that the primary threat facing these bordering countries was their “psychological malaise,” not the “Soviet military threat or the appeal of international Communism.”6 The correct U.S. response was therefore to engender political and economic as opposed to military components.

Kennan's limited view of containment and intervention was overshadowed by China's “fall” to communism in 1949 and the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1950, two events that led U.S.
policymakers to assume erroneously that a “monolithic” communist force was on the march in the Third World, especially Asia. This monolithic view of communism provided the basis for Paul Nitze's NSC-68 memorandum, which, in 1950, portrayed the Soviet Union "as indistinguishable from a world-wide Communist revolutionary movement, newly capable of initiating a war against the West and intent on world domination." The policy prescription was stark: without an active U.S. military commitment to containment of communism on a global basis, weak Third World countries would succumb, one after another, like so many dominoes.

Nitze's view of monolithic communism being on the march seemingly would be confirmed by communist North Korea's invasion of South Korea shortly after NSC-68 was written. This historical event served as a catalyst, making NSC-68 the foundation for an active U.S. foreign policy of intervention in the Third World based on the twin themes of anticommunism and containment. Furthermore, these two themes would provide the basis of a cold war consensus that would last through four administrations and that would not be questioned until the United States became mired in a losing war in Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy best captured the cold war consensus in his January 1961 inaugural address when he called upon Americans to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe" in the fight against communism.

Despite changes in official perceptions of the Soviet Union and communism in the wake of U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the U.S. policy of intervention in the Third World remained rather consistent. For example, the Nixon and Ford administrations deviated from cold war internationalism by portraying the Soviet Union as a traditional superpower with which the United States could negotiate rather than as the head of a global communist threat. Yet, as it did during the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. policy toward Third World conflicts continued to be guided by the overarching importance attached to the East-West struggle and largely mirrored the accepted precepts of the cold war period: maintenance of the status quo, antipathy to revolutionary change, and active containment of the Soviet Union. The major change in the doctrine of containment, known as the Nixon Doctrine, was that regional Third World allies (such as Iran) would act as U.S. military proxies to maintain the regional status quo, and therefore U.S. interests, in the Third World.

The Carter administration offered the brightest hope for a positive Third World policy not driven by the ideological assumptions of the cold war period. Attempting to chart a bold new course in the Third World, President Carter, in a 1977 address at Notre Dame University, seemingly rejected the policies of containment and anticommunism:

Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in
that fear. For too many years we have been willing to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our values for theirs. We have fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water. This approach failed, with Vietnam the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty.  

Despite initial commitment to such a new course in the administration's first year, most noted by an active human rights policy, Carter returned to the comfort of cold war precepts as several events rocked his administration in its last two years: the fall of the shah of Iran, the hostage crisis, the Sandinista revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As two policy analysts cogently argue:

The most basic underlying assumptions that guided policy did not change. . . . Perhaps the most important continuity in vision was a widespread acceptance of the doctrine of containment—a commitment to prevent the "spread" not simply of Soviet power but of "communism." Revolutionary regimes of the left were still considered antithetical to US global interests, and the aim of US policy was still to minimize the chances of such outbreaks and "takeovers." . . . Few publicly questioned either the power of the United States to influence the character of Third World regimes or the necessity—indeed the global responsibility—to do so.

The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 witnessed the complete embrace of the anticommunist cold war internationalism of the 1950s and 1960s and its concomitant tendency to view all Third World conflict and instability as the result of Soviet machinations. Transcending mere containment, the Reagan administration instead underscored the need to roll back recent communist advances in the Third World, most notably through U.S. paramilitary support of guerrilla forces fighting Soviet-supported Third World communist regimes. Popularly known as the Reagan Doctrine, it has been invoked to provide economic and military support to guerrillas fighting Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua.

The enunciation of the Reagan Doctrine merely intensified a trend, which had begun in the nineteenth century, of greater U.S. intervention in the Third World: economic expansion during the twentieth century against external interests in Central America eventually prompted the United States to adopt a regional antirevolutionary foreign policy based on stability and the status quo. U.S. hegemony at the end of World War II, combined with the rise of the Soviet state as its greatest competitor in the Third World, facilitated the carry-over of an antirevolutionary, status quo foreign policy on a global basis and synthesized it with a virulent anticommunism. The resulting policy of containment ensured that all subsequent U.S. administrations (although with some variation) would be hostile to revolutionary change
in the Third World, mistakenly formulating their respective Third World foreign policies through the restrictive framework of the East-West struggle. The inherent faults in following such a policy in the post–World War II period can be grouped under two themes: antagonism toward the Left and support of the Right.

Antagonism toward the Left

U.S. competition with the Soviet Union at the height of the cold war fostered a simplistic view of relationships with Third World elites. These elites were viewed as mere pawns to be won on the greater East-West chessboard, leading U.S. policymakers to ignore the strength of Third World nationalism and erroneously confuse it with communism. For example, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles depicted these elites as either pro-Soviet or pro-American, with nonaligned nations falling under the former category and ultimately being suspected of harboring procommunist tendencies. The net result was U.S. direct involvement in overthrowing several democratic nationalist regimes whose successors, in most cases, would come back to haunt the United States.

It is ironic that Iran, a nation that became the bête noire of both the Carter and Reagan administrations, has the dubious distinction of boasting the first nationalist regime to be overthrown by the United States in the post–World War II period. Premier Mohammed Mosaddeq came to power on May 1, 1951, and earned the disdain of the international community by nationalizing the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Mosaddeq was head of the National Front, a nationalist coalition built around the oil issue. Although the U.S. State Department denounced him as leading the country on a path toward communism, his only real sin was attempting to gain control over his country's most important resource: oil. As is well known, the Eisenhower administration removed Mosaddeq in 1953 through a CIA-directed coup, restoring the pro-West shah Reza Pahlavi to power.

The irony of the coup is that although the United States gained a staunch ally in the short run, Washington would be faced in the long run with a virulently anti-American revolutionary regime. Most important, one can argue that the revolution's radical nature and fundamental anti-Americanism are due to the U.S. coup in 1953 and subsequent support of the shah over a period of twenty-five years. One cannot help but wonder how history would have been different if the United States had allowed a populist Iranian regime in 1953 run its course.

A second instructive case is the U.S. overthrow in 1954 of Guatemala's democratically elected and reform-minded Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Arbenz, realizing that the key to success lie in land reform (a problem faced by all
of Central America), sought to build on reforms initiated in the 1944 middle-
class revolution by mobilizing disenfranchised groups into the political arena.
He immediately ran into problems because the reform program included
redistribution of 234,000 acres of unused land owned by United Fruit
Company, the owners of which would vociferously protest these actions to
the U.S. government. Arbenz also met with disfavor in Washington when
he legalized the Guatemalan Communist party and brought a few of its
leaders into the government. As in the Iran case, "U.S. policymakers came
to perceive the Arbenz reforms as steps toward communism," a belief that
led to a CIA paramilitary invasion by Guatemalan exiles that would overthrow
Arbenz and install a military government led by Castillo Armas.13

Once again, U.S. intervention would destroy democratic social forces
seeking reform, thereby setting in motion several processes that in the long-
run would make political violence "a constant factor in Guatemalan life."14
The next thirty-two years would find Guatemala ruled by a host of repressive
military dictatorships, which would balk at any measure of social reform and
thus fuel growing levels of guerrilla insurgency. Despite Guatemala's return
civilian rule in 1986, it remains to be seen if the military will relinquish
any real degree of its power to the elected regime. One critic notes:

Unless social reforms and a modicum of political democracy are genuinely
implemented in Guatemala, the guerrillas, who have been defeated but not
crushed, will again gather strength. By the end of the decade, Guatemala
may no longer be a sideshow for U.S. policymakers.15

U.S. disfavor with (and misunderstanding of) the democratic left is most
poignantly shown by the still largely concealed role of the United States in
overthrowing the democratically elected socialist president of Chile, Salvador
Allende Gossens in 1973. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was reported
to have stated: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country
go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."16 Kissinger's
incredulous rationale for U.S. concern was that he had "yet to meet somebody
who firmly believes that if Allende wins there is likely to be another free
election in Chile."17 Seymour Hersh rightly notes that this was a "ludicrous
statement, in view both of Allende's graceful acceptance of defeat in the
1958 and 1964 elections and of Chile's long-standing commitment to
democratic government."18 Sadly, democratic elections would become a thing
of the past after 1973 in Chile, not because of Allende's victory but rather
because of his overthrow and replacement by the dictatorial General Augusto
Pinochet.

The most ominous factor in these three cases is that the United States
had assumed the right of overthrowing democratic regimes in the name of
anticommunism and maintenance of U.S. interests in a given country. In
the long run, the results have been sobering: Iran now boasts a radically
anti-U.S. revolutionary regime, Guatemala has suffered a legacy of military
dictatorships and guerrilla insurrections, and Chile sports one of the most
dictatorial regimes in the world. The crisis generated by U.S. involvement
in Iran and the potential for future crises for U.S. foreign policy in both
Chile and Guatemala suggest that perhaps the United States would have
been better off siding with each country's democratic predecessors. 19

It is important to note that success in overthrowing both the Mosaddeq
and Arbenz regimes at relatively cheap cost and using covert means in the
immediate postwar period undoubtedly gave subsequent U.S. administrations
a false sense of power and ability to control the nature of other Third World
regimes. One must also note that the United States was successful in both
cases (and in Chile also) because the regimes represented fragile democratic
coalitions with powerful enemies—most notably disenchanted militaries—
that were all too happy to take control in exchange for U.S. economic and
military support. As Washington was soon to learn, shaky democratic
regimes are much easier to deal with than revolutionary movements based
on nationalism.

U.S. intervention in Vietnam is perhaps the most tragic and written-
about U.S. encounter with revolutionary nationalism. Nowhere has national-
ism been more misunderstood and ignored. It is extremely difficult in
retrospect to understand how the United States became involved in a land
war with a people who had resisted Chinese and Cambodian attempts at
control for centuries, maintained a guerrilla insurgency against occupying
Japanese forces in World War II, and finally defeated French ambitions at
restoring their colonial empire. U.S. intelligence agents reporting in 1945 to
President Truman's secretary of state, James Byrnes, presciently noted that
the Vietnamese were "determined to maintain their independence even at
the cost of their lives [since] they have nothing to lose and all to gain." 10

The irony of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War is that the United
States had covertly aided Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh during World War
II in his battle against the Japanese and that Ho had hoped the United States
would guarantee Vietnam's independence at the end of the war. 10 The United
States, rather than support Ho's quest for independence, would back the
French return to Indochina, subsequently replacing the defeated forces of
its ally with its own combat forces. The final result would be over 58,000
American soldiers killed and the first major U.S. defeat in the Third World.

The tragedy of Vietnam is twofold. First, it underscores the U.S.
inability to recognize the legitimacy of popular revolutionary movements
when they espouse leftist ideologies. As one foreign policy analyst has
suggested, "It is now quite likely that early support for a still pro-American
Ho Chi Minh rather than for his colonial masters might have created an ally
instead of an enemy." 22 Although such a policy would most likely have
ensured a communist Vietnam, it would also have meant a highly nationalist and independent Vietnam, seeking strong links with the United States and a less restrictive relationship with the Soviet Union than is currently the case. The second tragedy of Vietnam is that the first lesson still has not been learned.

The primary misconception driving U.S. foreign policy toward revolutionary regimes is that they, along with the Soviet Union, can “export” revolution to the Third World. According to this viewpoint, revolution is not caused primarily by regionally specific factors or internal contradictions of the nation in question (such as lack of land reform, starvation, nonexistent medical care) but rather is the result of communist aggression led by the Soviet Union. Typical of this approach is Reagan’s characterization of revolutionary conflict: “Let us not delude ourselves. The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren’t involved in this game of dominoes, there wouldn’t be any hot spots in the world.”

History simply does not support this proposition. Successful revolutionary movements at first fight with weapons acquired locally, usually from opposing forces; external arms do not arrive until the guerrillas have proved themselves on the battlefield. For example, Fidel Castro received Soviet military support only after the revolution was won, and Ho Chi Minh initially armed his forces with Japanese and French arsenals captured during World War II. In fact, when Castro attempted to export revolution to Central America during the 1960s, he met with failure; the guerrilla forces were easily defeated due to their inability to attract a major following. This point was driven home when Che Guevara, attempting to repeat the success of the 1958 Cuban revolution, led a band of guerrillas into eastern Bolivia in 1966. He was betrayed by the rural peasantry and summarily executed by the Bolivian armed forces.

The example of the Nicaraguan revolution is especially instructive. Although the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) received Cuban arms during the 1960s, this aid was discontinued after 1970, not beginning again until 1979 when the insurrection against Somoza already was well underway. More significant is that Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama, and Cuba coordinated arms deliveries to the Sandinistas, with the majority of arms during the final phases of the war coming from Venezuela and Panama. This was hardly a communist conspiracy for revolution.

The Carter administration deviated from the dominant viewpoint that revolutions primarily are caused by external communist aggression, instead centering on the internal causes of upheaval and the need for structural reform to alleviate them. Despite this understanding, Carter’s policy of resolving the internal conditions that breed insurgency failed because, like his predecessors, he favored excluding leftist groups from political participation. Genuine structural reform, and hence defusing of the guerrilla threat,
"is highly unlikely as long as the left is automatically to be excluded from political participation."28

In the case of El Salvador, for example, a reform-minded junta took power in October 1979, aspiring to initiate structural changes that would defuse the country's growing guerrilla insurgency. The junta accepted leaders from the centrist opposition and was willing to carry out a dialogue with the radical left and include them in a future reconciliation government but had been stymied by rightist elements within the military.29 The junta, politically willing to move against the rightist elements (a group whose power had to be broken before genuine structural reform could take place), hesitated for lack of Carter administration support: "Though Washington favored social reform, it balked at the October junta's willingness to bring the popular organizations into the government and to seek an accord with the guerrillas,30 inevitably leading to a continuing stalemate in El Salvador's guerrilla war.31 When successor governments in the 1980s would attempt to initiate agrarian reform, one of the key problems fueling the guerrilla war, the net result would be failure: a still-powerful right would resist, and the left, still disenfranchised politically, would respond with increasing guerrilla attacks. Although favoring social reform, Carter's reliance on the cold war precept of limiting leftist participation ensured its doom. This trend has been exacerbated by Reagan's overwhelming commitment to a military solution of the conflict as opposed to a negotiated settlement.

A corollary to the export-for-revolution thesis is that a leftist revolutionary leader becomes a tool for international communism. The Pentagon Papers, for example, dismissed the possibility that Ho Chi Minh or Mao Zedong could be both nationalists and communists.32 This point is extremely important: once policymakers deny the revolution any political or historical legitimacy, they then "assume a right of intervention to subdue it."33 Although this view obviously has changed concerning the U.S. relationship with China in light of the enduring Sino-Soviet split, current U.S. thinking still views with suspicion Third World leaders seeking close relationships with the Soviet Union. Again this proposition is dubious at best. To be sure, Soviet allies such as Cuba follow the Soviet lead when it is viewed as complementary to their national interests. Common interests, however, should not be construed as the Soviets dictating orders: "The indigenous Revolutionary—Tito, Castro, Hoxa, or Ho—fiercely guards his independence... His views are his own, for he has made his own revolution."34 Furthermore, history is replete with examples of former so-called Soviet client states, including (but not limited to) China, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Somalia, and Sudan, which have expelled the Soviets when the latter's presence becomes inimical to the foreign policy interests of the former. In Third World politics, self-interest and nationalism are thicker than ideology.

The faults and drawbacks of the U.S. inability to cope successfully with
revolutionary nationalism are shown by the Reagan Doctrine and its support of so-called democratic freedom fighters in Nicaragua. To appreciate fully the Nicaraguan example, it is necessary to examine U.S. foreign policy toward Castro's Cuba, the first socialist revolutionary regime in Latin America.

Castro's success in overthrowing the popularly hated and U.S.-supported Batista regime in 1959, and subsequent stated desires to reform Cuba's economy along socialist lines, incurred the wrath of Washington. Rather than accept the validity of the Cuban revolution, the United States attempted to isolate Castro diplomatically, initiated a trade embargo (which continues to this day), authorized assassination attempts, and ultimately managed the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of the island in 1961 by CIA-trained exiles.

The Bay of Pigs invasion, consciously designed by the CIA with the Guatemalan model in mind, met with utter disaster. Unlike the weak democratic government confronted and overthrown in Guatemala, the United States had attacked a revolutionary regime enjoying almost total support among the general population and especially within the military. Rather than overthrow Castro, the attempted invasion merely strengthened his position on the island—the exact opposite of what the United States was trying to achieve. The explanation for this is simple: "When a regime has any large degree of popular support and legitimacy, a foreign state's force, pressure, and propaganda directed against the country may only cause the people to rally around their government." More important, Castro, who was completely isolated by the United States, had no choice but to turn to the Soviet Union to ensure the longevity of his regime against potential future attacks by the United States. To be fair, it is undoubtedly true that Castro's sympathies lie with the Soviet Union's stance toward revolution and social change and that he held a deep mistrust for U.S. intentions concerning the Cuban revolution, even before the invasion. Yet Castro's famous "betrayal" speeches of April 16 and December 2, 1961, in which he declared his Marxist-Leninist beliefs and alliance with the Soviet Union, occurred after U.S. attempts to overthrow the revolution through the Bay of Pigs debacle.

One can argue that the U.S.-sponsored invasion substantiated Castro's fears and forced him into the willing embrace of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ridiculed as "stupid" U.S. efforts "to drive Castro to the wall," nonetheless relishing the expected results: "Castro will have to gravitate to us like iron filings to a magnet."

U.S. foreign policy in Nicaragua is repeating the mistakes made in Cuba during the last three decades. The Reagan administration has attempted to isolate Nicaragua diplomatically, has maintained a trade embargo, and is supporting a paramilitary group, the contras, in order to prevent another Soviet beachhead (tool for international communism thesis) in the Western Hemisphere (the first being Cuba). Although original justifications for
supporting the contras wavered between interdicting arms being sent to Salvadoran guerrillas (export of revolution thesis) and forcing the Sandinistas to democratize their system of governance, the real aim, as in Cuba in 1961, seemingly has been the overthrow of the Sandinista regime: "At issue was not a particular Sandinista policy, but the Sandinistas themselves; the Sandinista cancer had to be extirpated lest it spread through Central America and into Mexico."  

Similar to the Cuban case, the Nicaraguan revolution enjoyed great popular support through the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza, one in a long line of hated and U.S.-supported dictators. Also, U.S. intervention into Nicaraguan affairs has enabled the Ortega government to silence its opponents more easily, concentrate power, and blame the United States for the increasingly evident failure of the economy. Most important is that U.S. attempts to isolate the Sandinista regime have unproductively radicalized the revolution, driving it even closer to the Soviet Union—the exact opposite of what the Reagan administration was attempting to achieve.

The primary problem with the Reagan approach is that it vastly underestimated the popular support of the Sandinista regime and the legitimacy of the 1979 revolution. The same mistake was made with Castro’s Cuba, and nearly thirty years of confrontation with that regime has achieved little if any benefit for U.S. foreign policy. Rather than seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government, the United States should be wholeheartedly supporting the major tenets of the Arias peace plan. If the nations of the region are satisfied with allowing a socialist neighbor to coexist along their borders, albeit one that does not interfere in their domestic affairs, the United States should follow their wishes. Unfortunately, rather than muster its extensive influence in the region to ensure compliance with the proposal, the United States has aided its demise through continued intransigence and seeming insistence on achieving a military rather than a negotiated settlement.

Support of the Right

Antagonism to the left is only one-half of the U.S. foreign policy equation in the Third World. The complementary half includes support for anticommunist, pro-West elites and manifests itself in several different ways. The United States may provide military and economic aid to a pro-West faction during a civil crisis to ensure it ultimately takes power (for example, Mobutu and the Congo crisis in 1965), initiate a coup against a nationalist leader suspected of communist tendencies (such as Mosaddeq in 1953) and install an anticommunist stalwart in his place (for example, Shah Reza Pahlavi), or support the illegal seizure of a government by a U.S.-trained military officer (for example, Nicaragua’s Anastasio Somoza Garcia in 1936).
What has warmed the ideological predilection of American elites and almost virtually guaranteed U.S. support are statements such as the following by Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet: “I am against communists and I will continue fighting until the end.”

The often disregarded long-term problem with this anticommunist strategy is that the regimes who have become the “bastions for democracy” and therefore staunch U.S. allies—the shah, Marcos, Batista, Mobutu, and Duvalier to name a few—are generally headed by traditional dictators lacking in popular support and primarily interested in personal aggrandizement. The United States therefore has created an inherently unstable link with the “dominant personality” as opposed to the “institutionalized government” of a Third World country.

The case of Zaire illustrates the fragile nature of a regime installed and maintained by the United States. The Belgian Congo (Zaire) suffered extreme civil disorder upon independence on July 1, 1960, due to infighting among factions within the government and secessionist demands by several regional leaders. In response to increased instability, President Kennedy ordered the CIA to determine which Congolese faction would best serve U.S. interests. Covert military aid was extended beginning in October 1962 to the chosen candidate, a young colonel named Joseph Mobutu (currently Mobutu Sese Seko), who gradually would defeat his opponents and assume the leadership of Zaire by military coup in 1965. The short term undoubtedly seemed bright as Mobutu restored stability in Zaire, put the country on a capitalist pro-West path, and promised to be a staunch anticommunist ally in the Third World.

In the long run, however, Zairian society has regressed to the point that conditions for popular rebellion exist. The following statement by Thomas Callaghy, specialist on Zaire, details the unstable nature of the Mobutu regime:

Its total foreign debt is now about $4.5 billion, economic growth has all but stopped, and the mass standard of living has fallen precipitously in recent years. Agricultural output is down dramatically; nutrition levels and literacy rates are falling dangerously; and social welfare services and the transportation network have seriously deteriorated. Unemployment and underemployment levels are dangerously high, inflation is rampant, and corruption permeates the political structure, particularly at the top. Mobutu and his political elite live grandly, while the vast majority struggle from day to day. Periodically, the regime grandiosely announces sweeping “policies” to deal with these problems, but they are never implemented in any serious way. For example, agriculture has been “priority of priorities” for years now, while rural decline continues. The regime’s real substantive thrust is that of control and personal aggrandizement, despite its revolutionary rhetoric and Mobutu’s attempt to wear Lumumba’s mantle.
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The precarious nature of Mobutu’s regime was highlighted by its inability to quell secessionist drives on its Shaba province in 1977 and 1978, having to rely on U.S.- airlifted Moroccan troops in 1977 and U.S.- airlifted French and Belgian troops in 1978. Callaghy warns that “Mobutu has made no real preparation for a succession and, if something were to happen to him, Zaire might well disintegrate again as it did during the early 1960s.”43 More to the point is a statement made by a Zairian intellectual: “We are suffering here, and it is because of the Americans. We cannot change the government because you support Mobutu for the copper. But the revolution will come, and we will kick you all out.”44

The Zairian case is indicative of a problem that has plagued U.S. links with Third World dictatorships and ultimately has contributed to their revolutionary overthrow: the same dictators the United States has supported (and in several cases placed in power) because of their anticommunist, conservative beliefs are the same men who have shown a general disregard for social reform or broadly shared development policies targeted toward the majority of the population. Several of the following conditions intertwined to seal the fate of Marcos, the shah, Duvalier, Somoza, and many others: increasing income gaps between rich and poor; accumulation of vast wealth by the ruling family through personal control of major aspects of the economy; increasing mass poverty (from already low levels) in the rural areas and urban shantytowns; limited access to basic social services and lack of meaningful political participation for the majority of the population; and exclusion of the rising middle class from sharing in the political and economic benefits of the ruling class.45

The core of the problem is that the traditional dictator seeks legitimacy in the international arena—in the form of military and economic aid—rather than from the domestic environment. When the United States has been willing to fill this role, the dictator’s need to foster popular domestic legitimacy through reform is sorely circumscribed. And as dissent against the regime grows, the tendency is toward greater repression rather than reform.

It is not difficult to understand why anti-American revolutions are almost inevitable against U.S.- supported dictatorships. In the case of Iran, for example, the United States installed a leader, the shah, lacking in popular support. As popular dissent against the regime grew, the shah, rather than open up the political system, increasingly relied on systematic repression through SAVAK, the highly feared secret police. Furthermore, lack of meaningful reform increased social inequalities within the urban areas (most notably Tehran) and raised expectations of the rural dwellers, the majority of whom were missed by the shah’s great “white revolution.”46 To the vast majority of the population, the United States undoubtedly was looked upon as both the midwife and primary prop of the hated regime. When the end
for the shah did come, it is not surprising that the revolution vented an accompanying anti-American rage. This case study is not unique but rather is indicative of a general trend (although with variation), including Cuba (1959), Ethiopia (1974), Vietnam (1975), and Nicaragua (1979).

What is difficult to understand is why the United States continues to associate itself with illegitimate dictatorships whose long-term viability is doubtful. The major reason is that the theme of anticommunism has been fused with the incremental nature of U.S. foreign policy relationships with Third World allies. Incrementalism, or a slowly increasing economic and military commitment to a Third World ally, is the result of a four-year U.S. presidential term favoring the continuance of existing foreign policy relationships. There usually is hesitancy in fundamentally decreasing ties with a “proved ally” of strategic importance, regardless of the inequities in its social structure or political illegitimacy, because of the fear that the regime will either turn to the Soviet Union or will be replaced by a more radical regime inimical to U.S. interests. In short, the general maxim for U.S. relations with Third World allies has been: “If it ain’t broke, why fix it?”

In the case of Mobutu, for example, U.S. administrations consistently have been willing to ignore the corrupt nature of his regime because of its strategic location in southern Africa, control over vast copper reserves, and role as a staunch bulwark against communism. President Nixon “was delighted to work with the anti-communist Mobutu.” Similarly, President Reagan assured Mobutu of strong U.S. support, making issues of corruption and reform secondary to Zaire’s role in the containment of international communism. Even President Carter, despite original intentions of pursuing a vigorous human rights stance in Zaire, ended up supporting Mobutu. Lack of a “viable alternative” to Mobutu amid fears that pressure “would be accompanied by chaos” ensured that human rights took a backseat to national security interests.

President Carter’s human rights program, which would question the utility of identifying the United States with inherently unstable dictatorships, had the potential of deviating from the incrementalist norm. Although promotion of human rights was the guiding theme of Carter’s involvement in successfully achieving the transition to majority rule in Zimbabwe, its application generally was reserved for countries, such as Guatemala, not considered strategically significant to the United States. When the pursuit of human rights clashed with perceived national security interests, especially in proved allies of strategic importance (examples are Iran, the Philippines, South Korea, and Zaire), the former took a backseat to the latter. Similarly, when events in a country targeted for a vigorous human rights campaign reached a crisis stage in which the traditional ally was threatened by hostile leftist forces, the cold war reflex to support the dictator won out:
As instability gave way to insurrection in Nicaragua, the Carter Administration was caught in Hobson's choice of standing by its commitment to human rights or subordinating humanitarian concerns to the traditional ones of national security. . . . The result was a paralysis of policy during the critical months of 1978, and an eventual decision to salvage Somoza long after that became an impossibility. 52

Carter's human rights campaign, already compromised by numerous exceptions for national security reasons, increasingly was pushed to the background as the issues of containment and anticommunism took on even greater importance in the last two years of the administration.

The Philippines today presents a poignant example of everything that is wrong with the incrementalist nature of U.S. foreign policy. Five successive U.S. administrations from President Johnson to President Reagan (1966–1986) disregarded Ferdinand Marcos's corruption and systematic destruction of Filipino democracy because of his staunch anticommunism and ownership of bases perceived as integral to U.S. global defense. Richard Kessler, specialist on the Philippines, notes:

As long as the communist insurgency was under control and the Filipino people were not rioting, U.S. policy did not change. . . . [Marcos] understood that the United States remained concerned primarily about the bases and that consequently no U.S. policymaker would look into the underlying structure of his rule. 13

In fact, the United States intervened in promoting the departure of Marcos only after it had become clear that he had lost his ability to maintain power. 54 Luckily for the Reagan administration, the replacement regime was not a radical fundamentalist regime like that of Khomeini but rather was led by the moderate, pro-U.S. Corazon Aquino.

Yet despite optimism in Aquino's democratic revolution, the regime is extremely fragile and unstable. The U.S.-supported Marcos systematically had looted the economy and destroyed its democratic framework over a period of twenty years such that 70 percent of the population lived in poverty in 1986 (as compared to 28 percent in 1965, the year before Marcos first came to power), a communist-led insurgency grew from 11 people in 1968 to an armed force of 20,000 in 1985 (active in all seventy-four provinces), and politicization of the armed forces has led to numerous coup attempts and continuing mutinies throughout the country since Aquino took power. 55 Despite Aquino's best intentions of restoring democracy, the country has been left a legacy of instability that will be extremely difficult to overcome.

The most damning aspect of the current crisis in the Philippines is that it was avoidable. Kessler convincingly argues that the United States had several opportunities between 1966 and 1986
to force Marcos from power or to distance the U.S. from his excesses... [which] would not have required actions that might be viewed as American manipulation of Philippine politics. On the contrary, such actions would have been viewed as American support for the will of the Filipino people.36

Most notably, the United States could have displayed strong disapproval when the possibility of martial law and subsequent suspension of the constitution was broached in 1972 and then carried out in the same year (suspension of the constitution, which limited a leader to two terms, was necessary for Marcos to stay in power). Marcos was afraid of the U.S. reaction, and strong U.S. disapproval could have succeeded in deterring him.37 Unfortunately, both before and after the declaration of martial law, Marcos received tacit U.S. support.

In short, U.S. disregard for Marcos's dismantling of democracy in the Philippines to protect short-term interests of easy access to strategic bases clearly has been detrimental to U.S. interests in the long run, and conditions there are likely to worsen rather than improve. Indeed, the popular press has noted that the Philippines has become increasingly nationalistic and anti-American, and, even worse, U.S. soldiers for the first time are being sought and killed by communist guerrillas.38

Endless Enemies or Future Friends?

The twin themes of antagonism to the left and support of the right have served as the foundation for a faulty U.S. foreign policy in the Third World. In the words of one writer, it has made the United States and the Third World "endless enemies."39 How should U.S. foreign policy be changed so as to shed its image as the enemy of social change and protector of the status quo, instead providing the basis for a long-term relationship in which the United States becomes the standard-bearer for positive social change in the form of democracy and broadly shared development? In short, how can these "endless enemies" become "future friends"?

The United States must first discard the ill-conceived notion that Third World countries are merely pawns in the greater East-West struggle and that the primary source of conflict in these countries is external Soviet interference. Viewing social change through East-West glasses ensures a reactive policy constrained by the ideological blinders of anticommunism. The United States must instead analyze the regional or internal causes of a particular conflict. In this fashion, the conflict becomes important in its own right and lends itself to resolution based on internal structural changes. When the United States has followed such a prescription, as in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), the results have been gratifying.
In the case of Zimbabwe, the United States and Great Britain cooperated in pressuring the white minority regime of Ian Smith to accept universal suffrage and rapid transition to black majority rule even though this virtually ensured a regime dominated by the Patriotic Front (PF), a coalition of two guerrilla groups led by avowed Marxists and supplied by the Soviet Union and China. This case is significant for three reasons: (1) a more ideological approach would have eschewed supporting the PF because of its obvious communist links and outspoken sympathy of its leaders for Marxism; (2) the United States recognized the illegitimacy of the guerrilla struggle and that its resolution depended on internal political and economic reforms; and (3) the United States recognized the positive role to be played by the radical left in the reform equation. Indeed, despite the Marxist rhetoric of Zimbabwe's prime minister, Robert Mugabe, he has clearly followed a pragmatic policy of socioeconomic reform and maintenance of extensive links with the West, underscoring that ideology should not be the yardstick by which the United States determines enemies or allies in the Third World. Most important, British-American willingness to involve the left in meaningful political participation where it previously has been denied a role demonstrated that it can be the key to alleviating long-term guerrilla insurgency. 

What do these three lessons mean for future U.S. involvement with guerrilla insurgencies? In the case of El Salvador, for example, it would require recognition by the United States that the revolution is driven by lack of social reform and not by the Soviet-Cuban bloc and that therefore the guerrilla struggle of the FDR-FMLN is caused by legitimate, unfulfilled popular needs. Although reliance on massive military aid may be able to suppress the rebels in the short run (as is currently the case under the Reagan administration), in the long run, it merely strengthens those forces opposed to reform, virtually ensuring the reemergence of guerrilla struggle (witness Guatemala's recurrent guerrilla wars). The proper U.S. approach should be to emphasize its belief in the negotiated resolution of the conflict between the Salvadoran government and the FDR-FLMN, based on national reconciliation and socioeconomic reform.

Similar to the need to recognize the legitimacy of guerrilla struggle as an outgrowth of unfulfilled popular needs, U.S. foreign policy also must learn to deal constructively with revolutionary regimes when they do achieve power. Again, the key to this policy is that opposing ideologies do not in and of themselves preclude a mutually beneficial relationship (note growing U.S. ties with Marxist Mozambique, extensive oil trade with Marxist Angola, and a fruitful relationship with China). Yet often the relationship between the United States and the revolutionary regime is at first strained. In the case of Nicaragua, the Sandinista leadership was suspicious of U.S. attitudes toward the revolution, primarily due to past U.S. support for Somoza and previous intervention in Latin America, while the United States feared that
the Sandinistas were going to become the center for Soviet-Cuban destabilization efforts in Central America. Fears should not become the basis for foreign policy; when they do, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Carter administration broke with the traditional U.S. approach of generating hostility toward revolutionary regimes by attempting to build a constructive relationship with the Sandinistas in 1979. Hoping “to avoid repeating the errors of 1959–1960, when U.S. hostility drove the Cuban revolution to the left and into the arms of the Soviet Union,” Carter’s primary objective was to provide incentives to the Sandinistas to maintain the pluralist nature of the revolution. U.S. efforts were rewarded. As Carter left the presidency, “U.S.-Nicaraguan relations were normal, if not friendly, and the radicalization of the revolution which Carter had sought to avert had not yet happened.” The election of the Reagan administration and its hostile attitude toward the Sandinista regime hastened a degeneration of the relationship, especially after it became apparent in 1981 that Washington was funding the contras through CIA efforts in Honduras. As one policy analyst noted, the Reagan administration was not interested in compromise, embarking instead “on its Nicaraguan policy with the firm belief that the Sandinistas must be overthrown or, at least, theirs must become a revolution of misery, a frightful object lesson to the people of the region.” Yet although Washington’s paramilitary war has exhibited the ability to disrupt Nicaragua’s economic and political system, as surely it did in Cuba and North Vietnam, it is inadequate if the goal is overthrowing the Sandinistas or forcing them to accept U.S. demands to dismantle their system of governance. The Reagan administration, just as U.S. policymakers had done in Cuba in 1961, has failed to recognize the continued popular support of the Nicaraguan revolution.

U.S. inability to dictate militarily to the Sandinistas is indicative of a theme that should be a guiding factor in U.S. foreign policy: the increasing nonutility of (para)military intervention in achieving long-term goals in the Third World. Yet as two authors have lamented:

Vietnam’s “lesson”—that intervention against revolutionary nationalism in the Third World is at least futile and unacceptably costly, and at most, immoral, inhumane, and arrogant—has been lost in the higher circles of government. Instead, the war seems to have taught that the use of force abroad must be better managed, that the key issues concern public relations and command and control rather than political goals and values.

It seems that despite the defeat of counterinsurgency in Vietnam and the failure of the paramilitary war in Cuba in 1961, the Reagan administration continues to make the same mistakes by seeking similar solutions in El
Salvador and Nicaragua, respectively, as well as in numerous other areas of the Third World.

This does not mean, however, that the United States must adopt a strict policy of nonintervention in the Third World. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, several circumstances intersect to make military aid to the mujahedin guerrillas a worthwhile cause. According to accepted precepts of international law, the Soviet Union illegally has invaded and occupied the country, the Afghans are almost unanimous in desiring Soviet withdrawal, and the guerrillas enjoy overwhelming regional and international support. In contrast, U.S. aid for the contras in Nicaragua has been declared illegal under international law, the majority of Nicaraguans oppose U.S. intervention, and U.S. actions generally run counter to both regional and international opinion, even among traditional U.S. allies. Yet as one policy analyst has warned, U.S. military aid to the mujahedin should be limited to achieving the withdrawal of foreign occupation forces and should be accompanied by negotiations to achieve these objectives:

But the arms we supply, and our contact with Afghans, must be governed by the knowledge that when the issue of Soviet occupation is resolved, other, local issues will continue to divide the Afghans both within the country and in relations with their neighbors. We must not be lured into a continuing dispute that would ally us against new and so far undreamed-of enemies.

The purpose of U.S. support should not be to bleed the Soviets but rather should be based on achieving a negotiated settlement that recognizes Afghanistan's right to self-determination as well as placating Soviet fears of a hostile nation on its frontier.

The discussion thus far has centered on how the United States must restructure its relationship with the revolutionary left. The complementary component of this policy is the necessity to decrease U.S. economic and military aid links with authoritarian Third World allies. Rather than providing aid to authoritarian regimes that pass an anticommunist litmus test and rely on repression to maintain social order, U.S. aid programs must be revised to reflect more positive, long-term goals for U.S. foreign policy.

The restructuring of U.S. aid programs should follow relatively straightforward, yet stringent, guidelines. Economic aid should be provided only to nations respectful of the human rights of their people and committed to broadly shared development targeted toward the majority of the population. A regime committed to these two principles increases its domestic support and represents a positive, long-term investment for the United States. Military aid should be much more restrictive in nature. It should be limited to regimes based on some form of popular consent (not necessarily a
multiparty, democratic system) that are confronting a legitimate military threat. The theme of popular consent is extremely important. If this attribute is missing, U.S. military support becomes the basis for internal repression and control, again working counter to long-term U.S. interests in the Third World.

The first step in such a program would entail the cutting of all aid to authoritarian clients whose domestic politics match none of the guidelines, as in Zaire. Experience should have taught U.S. policymakers that Zaire's highly corrupt political and economic system, coupled with the obvious U.S. role as primary supporter of the regime, provides the recipe for potential disaster. Rationales for continued support of Mobutu, such as President Carter's fears that lack of an alternative will ensure chaos, although potentially true, also create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Mobutu has no incentive to reform as long as the United States and other Western donors continue to underwrite Zaire's economy, thus almost ensuring a further deterioration of the Zairian economy and the broadening of the base for popular rebellion. The propitious time for the United States to act is now rather than when a guerrilla insurgency is almost on the verge of victory and a crisis situation has developed (the route usually taken by the United States) or when Mobutu dies and there is no replacement. By cutting aid now, Mobutu will be forced to make the choice to reform. If he is unable or unwilling, perhaps another group of leaders, better able to do the job, will take power. Most important, it is the United States, by acting now, that sets the agenda for a future relationship with Zaire through a positive long-term vision based on human rights and broadly shared development.58

Withdrawal of special relationships previously held with authoritarian Third World countries does not mean the United States should adopt an isolationist foreign policy. Rather, it indicates that it will commit its valuable resources only to nations sharing an interest in promoting and maintaining societies built on popular consent and broadly shared development. In this sense, the United States should cultivate close relationships with regimes carrying out these programs, assisting financially or technically as needed.

Inevitably the United States will find itself closely involved with an ally whose democratic institutions and processes will be subverted by a leader or faction desirous of assuming personal control and power, such as when President Marcos stole the 1969 Philippines elections or declared martial law in 1972 to maintain himself in power (counter to the country's constitutional system). In cases like this, the United States should utilize its economic and military influence (gradually curtailing both types of aid, beginning with military) with the country in question to foster a return to democratic practices. This type of action would not have been regarded negatively by the Filipino people but rather as support for the will of the people themselves.59
The important point of the Philippines case study is that five U.S. administrations refused to pursue this type of policy because of strategic concerns over U.S. base rights in the Philippines. In fact, it was this type of "strategic exception" that contributed to the failure of Carter's human rights policies. Even if one accepts the U.S. strategic need for bases in the Philippines or elsewhere in the world, long-term interests logically demand that the United States not turn a blind eye while democracy is destroyed in order to maintain these security interests. As the United States learned the hard way in Iran, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and in other nations of so-called strategic concern, past or present, disregard for the repressive nature of the regimes lacking popular support is a sure-fire way to lose these strategic interests in the long run, as well as foster the creation of a hostile anti-U.S. regime.

Finally, the United States inevitably finds itself confronted with authoritarian governments that systematically abuse the rights of their peoples but are not reliant on the United States for either military or economic aid. Because the United States cannot and should not be the guardian of all the countries of the world, it should maintain no more and no less than proper relations with these governments. In extreme cases, the United States may join other nations in adopting multilateral sanctions to change the nature of a particular regime. But sanctions should be pursued only when certain legitimizing factors intersect: the nation in question grossly violates the norms of international human rights, and the action is supported by the vast majority of the target nation's population and also overwhelmingly regionally and within the international system. One case study that fits these requirements is South Africa. The key to this type of policy is that the United States should act within a multilateral framework in coordination with other nations, and not merely according to its own ideological whims, as too often has been the case in the past (for example, Chile from 1970 to 1973).

In summary, past U.S. foreign policy in the Third World, built upon the twin themes of antagonism to the left and support of the right, has been both counterproductive and detrimental to long-term U.S. interests. Rather than pursuing negative status quo policies of anticommunism and counter-insurgency, the United States should instead become the standard-bearer for positive social change in the form of democracy and broadly shared development. The guiding principle of such a policy would be diplomatic negotiation rather than the increasingly outdated tool of military force. Officials must resist falling prey to short-term exigencies at the expense of long-term U.S. interests.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 38.
7. Ibid., p. 15.
9. Stupak, American Foreign Policy, p. 217.
17. Quoted in ibid., p. 278.
18. Ibid.
19. For an analysis of impending crises in both countries, see Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, "Is Chile Next?" Foreign Policy 63 (Summer 1986): 58–75; and Gleijeses, "Reagan Doctrine," pp. 401–37.
21. Ibid., p. 147.
24. Richard J. Barnet, Intervention and Revolution: America’s Confrontation with
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27. Ibid.
28. Morris J. Blachman et al., "The Failure of the Hegemonic Strategic Vision," in Blachman, Leogrande, and Sharpe, eds., Confronting Revolution, p. 335. Although the Kennedy administration also centered on the internal causes of revolutionary upheaval (placing more emphasis on external communist subversion than in the first two years of the Carter administration), it also centered on excluding leftist groups from participation.
30. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Barnett, Intervention and Revolution, p. 56.
40. Constable and Valenzuela, "Is Chile Next?" p. 69.
43. Ibid., p. 1306.
45. For an excellent discussion of these factors, see Rubin, Modern Dictators, esp. pp. 76–108.
47. For an examination of incrementalism as it applies to the U.S.-Somalia


50. Jackson, From the Congo to Soweto, p. 48; Dickson, United States Foreign Policy, p. 138.


52. Leogrande, "The United States," p. 64.


57. Ibid., p. 50.


60. Leogrande et al., "Grappling."


62. Ibid., p. 76. This is not to say, however, that this success would have continued had Carter won a second term. Indeed, the Sandinis may have pursued a conflictual policy regardless of that pursued by the United States.


64. Gurtov and Maghoori, Roots of Failure, p. 166.


67. The following guidelines for a preferred U.S. aid policy are drawn from Blachman, Leogrande, and Sharpe, Confronting Revolution, p. 353.

68. The Zairian case study is not unique but rather is indicative of U.S. relations with numerous Third World allies. For a similar argument favoring a cutoff of U.S. aid links to Somalia, see Schroeder and Rosati, "Policy Dilemmas in the Horn."