Revolutions, Coups, and Regrets:
U.S. Intervention in Latin America during the Cold War.

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From the Monroe Doctrine to the construction of the Panama Canal, the United States has been involved in many of the most important events in Latin America, and the history of Latin America is closely tied to that of the United States. With the relation that Latin America currently shares with the U.S. in mind, one would not find it shocking that the United States intervened all over Latin America during the Cold War. The United States rigged the elections in numerous Latin American countries, assassinated political figures in others, and even toppled governments all in the name of preventing the spread of Communism or protecting their economic interests. There are many examples of U.S. intercession in Latin America during this period in history. However, none provided an opportunity quite like that of Cuba and Chile. The Cuban Revolution and the Chilean Coup offer contrasting strategies of U.S. intervention during the Cold War.

Certainly not all of these intercessions were identical. When one is asked about U.S. intervention in Latin America, one’s mind probably conjures up images of the Cuban revolution and the infamous “Bay of Pigs” incident. Many Cubans consider April 17, 1961, the day of the Bay of Pigs invasion, a day of triumph as the Cuban government successfully fended off the attempted U.S. overthrow. The Castro Regime took power after a civil war on the island. The United States had initially supported the Cuban Rebels as Castro had not yet made clear his Communist leanings. However, despite attempts by the U.S. to prevent it or to sabotage it after the fact, Castro’s revolution in Cuba was successful and even survives today.

In Chile on the other hand, the United States was more successful. Not only was the United States able to look back at its experience with Cuba, but the situation in Chile in the early 1970s was fundamentally different than Cuba during its revolutionary period as well. The U.S. funded opposition parties in Chile to prevent socialist candidate Salvador Allende from winning the presidency. Allende came to power anyway after a free and fair democratic election. Despite this, opposition from the right in Chile still existed and resented his left-leaning policies. Allende would be deposed just three years after his inauguration through a military coup, supported by Chilean opposition parties and funded by the United States.

Cuban Revolutions

The story of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the Bay of Pigs Operation offer examples where U.S. intervention in Latin American affairs went awry. The whole situation in general was complex and changed rapidly as events unfolded. The revolution is perceived in the modern eye as simplistic and the motivations obvious. However, that viewpoint reveals a lack of understanding of the Cuban Revolution and the subsequent political quagmire. What follows will display this Cuban quagmire in all of its complexities.

The government of Fulgencio Batista emerged in Cuba after a coup in 1952. Only seven years later however, revolutionary forces under Fidel Castro overthrew the authoritarian and oppressive Batista regime. The insurgency against Batista developed a reputation inside and outside of Cuba as freedom fighters resisted the repressive Batista regime. Batista’s allies declined as the insurgency gained more ground and defeat loomed. Even the United States had all but abandoned him by 1958. The Eisenhower administration did not want to openly support Castro nor openly condemn Batista, but they knew a losing horse when they saw one. As journalist Richard Gott explains, “The man who once admired Franklin Roosevelt, and kept a bust of Abraham Lincoln on his desk, had been deserted by his American friends.”1 The U.S. continued to supply Batista’s regime with armaments but never nearly enough to stop the guerrillas.2 Perhaps this was because Eisenhower saw Batista’s impending defeat, or because Eisenhower knew the Cuban army would not be able to handle an influx of more advanced weaponry. Nevertheless, Batista did not receive American help. Batista had flown off of the island of Cuba and into exile. It was now Fidel Castro’s turn to govern. Batista’s fall did not surprise anyone paying attention to the Cuban Revolutionary War. What was surprising was the way in which the Revolutionary forces organized the country. The Eisenhower Administration thought the country would descend into chaos as it had done after the Revolution of 1933. With many of the guerrilla factions disagreeing politically and economically, a fracture in loyalty and a subsequent civil war was not entirely unreasonable. Castro, perhaps seeing an event like this coming, endorsed Manuel Urrutia Lleo for president and Jose Miro Cardona as prime minister, both of them moderate, conservative politicians. This seemed to calm the fears of American politicians and conservative Cuban thinkers as it showed that perhaps Castro was willing to work with people of farther right leaning ideologies.

It is important to remember that the Cuban Revolutionaries did not intend to oppose American interests. International correspondent Julia Sweig claimed, “Initially, the revolution was not an anti-American event... Of all the anti-Batista political parties, insurgent groups, underground militia, middle- and working class activists, high school and university students, doctors, lawyers, architects, and other professionals, the only group with an expressively

1 Richard Gott, Cuba: A New History, (New Haven, NY, Yale University Press, 2004), 164
2 Gott, An New History, 164.
anti-American line was the local communist party." In fact, many of the young Cuban revolutionaries looked up to the United States as an example to follow for its low levels of political corruption and prosperous economy. From this perspective, it would seem that the Eisenhower Administration was in the optimum position to have a strong diplomatic relationship with the new Cuban Government.

On the other hand, the assumption that the power would be evenly distributed in the provisional government may not have been entirely accurate. Latin American historian Louis A. Perez Jr. believes that the real power lay not in the provisional government, but in Castro's Revolutionary forces. The Cuban lower class had come to think of the Castro brothers and Che Guevara (his real name was Ernesto Guevara) as modern-day heroes. As a result, when push came to shove, the majority of the people were more likely to back the Revolutionaries than the politicians of the provisional government. The support from the people gave the revolutionary forces the ability to leave the message of “La Revolución” vague and ambiguous, simply saying that it would be different from what it was before. Along with the fervor of the revolution came the zeal of nationalism. This also increased Castro's power in the realm of Cuban politics. It became increasingly difficult to challenge Castro or the ideals of his cohorts. For many, the idea of being Cuban and the revolution were one in the same, and if any dissent were to emerge, as it would later do, Castro supporters (known as “Fidelistas”) would accuse the dissenters of being anti-revolutionary and therefore treasonous. It was not long before Urrutia and Miro resigned as a result of the restrictive political atmosphere, and Castro's opposition in Cuba steadily shrunk. No longer could the United States see the possibility of Cuba descending into chaos, and whatever plans the Eisenhower Administration were to consider concerning Cuba would have to include Fidel Castro.

The move toward socialism for Cuba did not happen overnight. At the beginning, Fidel Castro was not a communist or even a vocal socialist. That is not to say that Castro’s ideology was not left leaning. His socialist beliefs were well known and he surrounded himself with individuals, like his brother Raul and Che Guevara, who were staunch socialists. Fidel’s policies at first seemed to be simple reform measures but soon took the form of vocal Marxist-Leninist policies. Land began to be expropriated en masse, and the expropriations were targeted at foreign businesses. The new Agrarian Reform Law stated that no one person or company could own over 1,000 acres of Cuban land unless they were sugar or tobacco planters or cattle ranchers; in those cases the maximum was 3,333 acres. With the new Cuban land reforms the United States government started to feel that its economic interests were under threat.

U.S. companies had been well-established on the island for a long time previous. With this new restriction, those companies lost 2.5 million acres of land to the Cuban government. The United States government began to worry due to the Popular Socialist Party of Cuba gaining more traction in Cuban Politics and socialists were appointed to more positions in the Cuban government. The U.S. then hinted that it might very well reduce sugar imports in retaliation. Events began to unfold quite rapidly with the U.S. enacting measures to halt the influence of the Castro regime in Cuba and the Cuban government in turn began expropriating American businesses and developing closer ties with the Soviet Union and China. Eventually, the United States made good on its threats and halted purchases of Cuban sugar exports. The Soviets were all too happy to fill this void, which they had never expected that they would be able to do.

By the end of 1960, it became increasingly apparent to the United States that their relationship with Castro was beyond salvaging and that the U.S. could not accept Castro’s relationship with the Soviet Union. None of the political or economic attempts to dislodge Castro’s regime had worked, though it was not for lack of trying. The U.S. conducted small paramilitary operations against the expropriated industrial areas. The support of rebel groups against Castro took place, but these groups were disorganized and weak and found it hard to directly combat Castro’s militia. Internationally the United States was successful in discouraging European countries from doing business with Cuba. Other measures were taken including sabotaging Cuban imports with corrosive metals and improperly assembled parts. None of these operations diminished Fidel Castro’s grip on power in Cuba. It was not long before Eisenhower resolved to

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5 It should be noted that Sweig's book does not focus directly on the Cuban Revolution. Julia E. Sweig, Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution, (New York, NY, Public Affairs, 2006), 10-11.
6 Not long after seizing power in Cuba, Castro utilized the influences of radio and television. He gave speeches with crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands. He appealed to the Cuban working class attacking institutions of the past regime for not helping the people and for invigorating the wealthy at the cost of the laborers. This strategy was certainly effective as most of the institutions Castro was referring to were in disarray or outright gone, never really established in the first place to help the Cuban people. Louis A. Perez Jr, Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution, (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1995), 313.
7 Perez Jr, Reform, 320
8 Perez Jr, Reform, 322
9 Perez Jr, Reform, 325
10 For more information on this subject, refer to the Perez Jr. book.
11 Before the Cuban Revolution, Latin America was seen as the back yard of the United States and off-limits for the Soviets or their allies. Yet, evidently, here was the small island nation of Cuba with many U.S. business interests within its borders, standing up to the United States, or at least seeming to do so. The Soviets stepped in on Cuba’s behalf, buying up the sugar that would have gone to the United States, further cementing the friendship of the two nations. Perez Jr., Reforms, 325.
13 Perez Jr, Reform, 348
try a full military strategy. This operation was a legacy that the next U.S. president, John F. Kennedy, would continue.\textsuperscript{14}

The Bay of Pigs Operation is one of the most well-known events of this period in history, but it never should have taken place. The operation in general was not very well planned and did not take into account many factors. Its failure became infamous in the minds of American policy makers contemplating future Latin American foreign policy decisions. There was precedent to the Eisenhower Administration’s decision: in 1954, the CIA engineered a coup in Guatemala overthrowing the government of Jacobo Arbenz involving CIA-trained Guatemalan exiles delivered into the country by the CIA.\textsuperscript{15} With that precedent set, a group of CIA-trained Cuban exiles being delivered onto the island to overthrow the Castro Regime did not seem that extraordinary. Ironically, one of the places chosen to train the Cuban exile forces was Guatemala.\textsuperscript{16}

The Kennedy Administration was eager to prove that it would not be soft on communist activity and supported a military intervention as a result of the expropriations and Cuba’s new-found relationship with the Soviet Union. Few of Kennedy’s advisors had any reservations. A commonly claimed mistake was the cancelation of a second air strike on Cuban airfields after Castro began airstrikes on the invasion force. The CIA identified this as one of the crucial moments in the invasion, admitting, “Perhaps those air strikes would have no significant effect but in the view of the essentiality of eliminating Castro’s air force, it can be asserted that without these air strikes the plan never had a chance.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed one of the main goals in the planning of the operation was the elimination of Cuban air power. However, as American historian James Patterson explains, “When the first air strike failed to knock out his planes, Castro protected them from further assaults by dispersing them. It is unlikely, therefore, that a second strike would have given the invaders full control of the air.”\textsuperscript{18} Perhaps the estimation of opposition to the Castro Regime within Cuba was one of the most serious miscalculations. The CIA primarily believed that there was a willing, able, and large population of Castro opponents just waiting for the opportunity to rise up against him.\textsuperscript{19} As the invasion kicked off and Cuba rallied around the Castro regime, this thought proved fallacious. Whatever the individual miscalculations and underestimations, The Bay of Pigs operation proved to be a catastrophic debacle and horribly embarrassing for the United States. Its lessons would not go unnoticed by future administrations contemplating intervention in Latin America.

### Chilean Coups

The story of Chile’s coup of 1973 presents a different view of U.S. intervention in Latin America. In some ways the situation in Chile leading up to the coup was more complicated than that in Cuba prior to The Bay of Pigs operation. Certainly, the U.S. approach was much more hands-off concerning the socialist government of Salvador Allende than it had been concerning the Castro Regime in Cuba. It is also true however, that the conditions in Chile contrasted greatly from the situation in Cuba. Elements not only from the United States, but from within Chile as well, were instrumental in the coup. Some would even say that the domestic elements in Chile had a far greater role in the downfall of Salvador Allende than did the United States. What follows is not to say whether or not the U.S. was primarily responsible, but to simply display the situation clearly so as to see the similarities and differences between the U.S. intervention in Cuba and Chile.

President Nixon took special lessons from the military debacle at the Bay of Pigs and both he and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger were adamant about not repeating history. When the Chilean elections took place in 1970, the Nixon Administration acted to prevent Allende from winning, supporting Jorge Alessandri instead. However, when Allende won the election, Nixon and Kissinger determined that a different approach would be necessary. Certainly they believed that the government of Salvador Allende was a serious issue. The main concern was that a successful Allende government would set a precedent for other governments in Latin America to repeat the process in their home countries. As Nixon himself stated, “No impression should be permitted in Latin America that they can get away with this, that it’s safe to go this way.”\textsuperscript{20} Kissinger made an even sterner point regarding this precedent saying that a peaceful coexistence was completely out of the question because that attitude might give the impression that the United States would tolerate the consolidation of Allende as the president of Chile.\textsuperscript{21}

Nixon and Kissinger’s words made clear that the United States would seek to disrupt the Chilean government. However, the Nixon Administration had also done its homework on the Bay of Pigs invasion and knew that military intervention or even clear and present aggression from the U.S. would help, not hurt Allende, just as it had done for Castro in 1961.\textsuperscript{22} Publicly, the Nixon Administration was to declare that its policy toward the Allende Government would be “Cool but Correct” as Nixon was to say himself.\textsuperscript{23} This is to say that

\textsuperscript{14} Gott, A New History, 191
\textsuperscript{15} Helen Schooley, Conflict in Central America, (Harlow, Essex, UK, Longman Group UK), 22.
\textsuperscript{16} There were several lessons not mentioned that CIA officials had learned from the coup in Guatemala and that influenced their decision-making in the Bay of Pigs Operation. Gott, A New History, 191
\textsuperscript{17} Kornbluh, Declassified, 167
\textsuperscript{18} James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations, (Oxford, NY, Oxford University Press, 1996), 495-496
\textsuperscript{19} While there was some opposition from rebel groups fighting the revolutionary militia from the rural areas, the CIA, fearing leaks, failed to inform these groups of the coming invasion so as to coordinate efforts. Patterson, Grand Expectations, 492-495.
\textsuperscript{21} Kornbluh, Pinochet, 79.
\textsuperscript{22} Kornbluh, Pinochet, 81.
\textsuperscript{23} It was stressed to a great degree by the Nixon Administration that any attempt to subvert the Allende government was to stay covert and not released to the public so as not to damage the U.S. reputation on
the goal was to make clear the U.S.’s disapproval of a socialist government in Latin America, while remaining outwardly neutral in its posture. One of the main efforts made by the Nixon Administration concerning Chile was the funding of those parties and media outlets opposing Allende. One effort in particular was the “El Mercurio Project” which focused on supporting the newspaper, El Mercurio. This media outlet offered criticism of the Allende regime and maintained an atmosphere of opposition to the Unidad Popular, the party then in power. Efforts were focused on funding the newspaper and keeping it from going bankrupt as it was at the time going through tough financial straits. This U.S. funding ensured that the opposition and criticism to Allende would remain constant.

Another sector where the Nixon Administration focused its effort was with the Chilean military. Since its creation, the Chilean armed forces had a reputation for being apolitical and otherwise nonpartisan. Nevertheless, there was a noticeable amount of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Chile who were not happy with the direction that the government was taking. The Nixon Administration put much effort into exploiting this mistrust. The CIA put an emphasis on the idea that if there was to be a coup, it cannot be orchestrated from the United States. As the CIA themselves said in a memorandum, “There must be predisposition on the part of the military to take the initiative themselves, that artificially stimulated or ill-planned precipitous action would be counterproductive.” In contrast to the U.S. intervention in Cuba a decade earlier, this time the CIA wanted to assure the Chilean military acted more or less autonomously rather than the U.S. actively supporting an opposition force to the domestic military. One of the main reasons the Bay of Pigs Operation had failed was because the Cuban military had rallied behind Castro to fend off the invasion. If the military itself was the main actor in the coup, this problem would be avoided. It is also important to remember that opposition to Allende within the military existed in Chile at the time whereas opposition to Castro within the Cuban military did not exist during the Cuban revolutionary period. High ranking military officers heavily opposed the school reforms Allende undertook. Their children attended private school and saw the standardization of all schools, public and private as an attempt by the state to pollute the minds of their children with state ideology; some even referred to this as “thought control.” The civilian population who still supported Allende demonstrated vehemently against the military officers and in some cases encouraged the enlisted ranks to mutiny against the officers. The military responded by cracking down on opposition forces.

The political atmosphere became tense and the military began to despise the Allende government, whom many blamed for causing the political turmoil between the military and the Chilean left. The conflict resulted in a small coup attempt on June 29, 1973, when a single armored brigade attempted a move on the Chilean capital. However, the military as a whole was not yet on board with the coup and the rebellion was put down. The coup attempt highlighted the destabilization that was occurring within the country and only served to intensify opposition to Allende. Not long after, the military resolved that to stabilize the country, the Allende Regime had to go. The military high command prepared the coup by assuring that the senior officers loyal to Allende would be forced out of office. Namely, the Commanding General of the Army, Carlos Prats, was informed that he no longer had the confidence of the rest of the military. As a result, he resigned his post and was replaced by General Augusto Pinochet, a man who was thought to be a non-partisan constitutionalist.

The coup took place on the morning of September 11, 1973, when the military moved tanks and infantry toward La Moneda Palace in Santiago. Amongst deadly battles in the streets, Allende and his supporters continued to hold out against the rebels. It was not until a Chilean Air Force Jet struck the palace with rockets and the building was aflame, that the president shot himself in the head rather than surrender. The presidency of Salvador Allende had come to a tragic end.

One of the most disputed concepts concerning the U.S. intervention in Chile is that of the “Invisible Blockade,” that is, the idea that the U.S. strangled Chile’s economy under the Allende Regime through international economic influences and withholding credit. Allende used the idea of the Invisible Blockade when the economic situation in Chile started to worsen in late 1972 to early 1973. Even sourced authors within this essay disagree on whether the U.S. was the primary cause of Chile’s economic downturn and subsequent coup, or whether the causes lie with Chilean policymakers of the day. There is merit to both arguments. It cannot be debated that the intentions of the Nixon Administration were blatant; they wanted to assure that the Allende Regime would not survive in Chile. However, due to the administration’s fear of direct public opposition (again taking lessons from The Bay of Pigs) and the presence of large opposition within Chile (which had not existed in Cuba during its revolutionary period), it could be argued that the United States was not the only cause.

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24 The reasons for these financial straits are quite controversial. Some say that the newspaper was experiencing difficulties as a result of its own financial incompetency while others claim that it had been targeted by the Allende Government because of its vocal opposition.

25 Kornbluh, Pinochet, 91.

of the coup. For example, the U.S. copper companies, Anaconda and Kennecott, controlled over 70% of the copper trade in Chile.35 The copper trade represented a large portion of the Chilean economy. Nationalization of the copper mines by the Chilean government obviously upset Kennecott and Anaconda greatly, and Chile didn’t see the economic benefits that Allende had anticipated.36 Proponents of the existence of the Invisible Blockade see this as a result of the United States freezing commercial credits to Chile that the Chilean Government had previously used to purchase machinery and industrial parts. While this is true, historians Simon Collier and William F. Sater point out:

It did become difficult for the mines to obtain spare parts [from the United States], although it was often possible to purchase these through third parties. (When, for example, spare tires for Lectra Haul trucks were no longer available from the United States, they were obtained, more cheaply, from Japan.) Replacements for high-ranking technicians (including numerous Chileans) who left the mines after nationalization were more difficult to find than spare parts.37

Technicians left the mines for a number of reasons but a common one was the fact that the Allende government paid them in Chilean Escudos and not U.S. Dollars which had more value.38

Another point often referred to is the international aid delivered to Chile. Proponents of the existence of the Invisible Blockade point out that the Inter-American Development Bank ceased sending loans to the Allende government. This action further cut-off the Chilean economy from money that it had been relying on due to pressure from the United States to do so.39 However, this would have been contrary to the Nixon Administration’s policy of keeping the operations against the Allende government covert. On top of that, historian Paul E. Sigmund identifies that the Inter-American Development Bank halted loans to the Chilean government as a result of the organization’s policy against the expropriations of the Kenneecott and Anaconda mines, claiming it as expropriation without proper compensation.40 However, the policy itself also could be seen as malicious influence from the U.S. seeing as how the U.S. voted that the Inter-American Development Bank would be needed to approve loans to Chile.41 Sigmund may very well have stated it fairly when he said:

It would be more accurate therefore to describe the U.S. economic pressure on Chile as a credit squeeze rather than a ‘blockade.’ Chile was not prevented from buying or selling in the United States as, for instance, has been the case with Cuba… Chile’s access to credit from the U.S. and international banks was reduced (although by no means eliminated), but substantial credits were secured from European and Latin American countries, as well as from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China.42

The coup itself as a result cannot be entirely laid at the feet of the United States, although it certainly exacerbated the situation. Perhaps it is fair to assume the blame should be spread around. As former Chilean president Patricio Alwyn stated about the coup, “We were all responsible.”43

American Regrets

During the Cold War, the United States took several legally compromised and contentious actions in Latin America. The Bay of Pigs Operation in Cuba and the Chilean coup d’état are but two examples. These examples do contrast how the U.S. went about intervening in these countries.

In Cuba, a more direct militaristic strategy was taken, mainly because Castro had cemented himself pretty firmly into a position of power. The United States saw a militaristic strategy as the only option. Paramilitary groups were funded and sabotage operations took place in order to damage the Cuban government. After these endeavors failed, a full-scale military operation took place and it is well-known how that turned out. The Nixon Administration was able to take lessons from the Bay of Pigs operation. They understood that a blatant and direct military approach to the Allende Regime would most likely only serve to consolidate its power, just as it had done for Castro. As a result, the Nixon Administration chose a more covert approach: the support of opposition parties and right leaning media outlets in Chile. It is also true that the political situation inside Chile was different from how it had been in Cuba and internal meddling from parties inside Chile itself also contributed greatly to the eventual coup.

Although these events are well-documented, they are certainly not ancient history. The Chilean coup and the Cuban Revolution both affected their respective countries’ relationship with the United States in ways that are still visible today. It is important for the United States and the world to understand how the actions taken evolved and the reasons behind said evolution in order to ensure that they are not repeated. This understanding is necessary if the United States is to have a friendly

35 Kornbluh, Pinochet, 83.
36 The nationalization of Anaconda and Kenneecott’s mines was not exactly an expropriation. Allende delivered to both companies 30 year bonds where the Chilean government would slowly purchase their holdings within Chile with an added interest of no less than three percent. Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 334.
37 Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 335.
38 Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 335.
39 Kornbluh, Pinochet, 83.
41 When considering that the interest rates on the 30 year bonds given to Kenneecott and Anaconda were at the discretion of Allende himself and opponents of the Allende government claim that he intentionally manipulated the interest rates in order to seize more money, one can see how this back and forth gets more and more complicated. Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 335.
42 Sigmund, Overthrow, 175.
43 Alwyn was referring to all Chileans, but it is fair to give U.S. policy makers some of the responsibility as well. Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 335.
and productive relationship with Latin America moving forward.

**Bibliography**


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*Fig. 1 - Salvador Allende (left) and Fidel Castro (right) in Castro’s visit to Chile in 1971.*