

Cold War Anti-Communism and the Reconfiguration of U.S. Informal Empire in Latin America

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Abstract

This paper determines whether the Cold War led to the development of modern American imperialist ideology and practice in Latin America. It proposes that the Cold War did not give rise to American imperialism in isolation; instead, it transformed earlier forms of informal empire by translating economic dependence, military influence and cultural desire for freedom into the language of anti-communism, democracy and freedom. Through a comparative historical study, this paper will take Cuba, Chile and Panama as cases to explore the different forms of informal empire. Cuba is a case study of how pre-Cold War dependence and the Platt Amendment turned into a conflict over revolution, containment, and different models of modernity. Chile shows how the United States used covert operations, economic pressure and other means to undermine the democratically elected socialist government. Panama is a typical case of control over key facilities that does not amount to direct colonial rule. In all of the above cases, the United States has presented intervention as defensive protection for the "free world", but in practice, it has restricted the political and economic autonomy of Latin American countries. Therefore, the paper takes the Cold War anti-communism movement as a particular example of modernisation for old imperial practices.

Keywords

Cold War; U.S. imperialism; Latin America; informal empire; containment; Cuba; Chile; Panama.

1. Introduction

A problem in the twentieth century is that just as the word "imperialism" became taboo and tainted after World War II, imperial behaviour continued, and in many ways, was even worse. With the collapse of the European colonial empires and a loss of moral authority for the "civilizing mission", U.S. policymakers could no longer publicly state that their actions constituted a form of empire. Although the language of empire has gone out of public circulation, the practices of empire have not vanished either; they have merely changed. The above evolution is better known as an "informal empire" or "domination" that does not always require direct territorial rule [1].

After the Second World War, the United States was the first to be challenged by a different political ideology - Communism, rather than fascism. The defeat of Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy and Imperial Japan made it clear that the United States would be the "world's fortress for freedom", but the presence of the Soviet Union changed this notion to "containment". The ideological conflict between capitalism and communism offered a moral support system for U.S. expansion. Latin America is a typical case of this, as it has long been considered to be within the range of the Monroe Doctrine's 'special period' [2,3].

Latin America was a region of focus for US foreign policy during the Cold War. From Cuba to Chile and Panama, U.S. leaders often viewed left-wing movements not as local social struggles

for equality but as signs of Soviet aggression against "America's backyard", and thus the region was subjected to a pattern of military intervention, covert operations, and economic pressure. Therefore, the original question of this paper is whether the Cold War led to new US imperialism. The answer in this paper is as follows. The Cold War did not create U.S. imperialism, but rather offered an older imperial form with a new ideology and a more modern structure.

Cold War anti-communism reconfigured the U.S. informal empire in Latin America, according to this paper. Motivated by the desire to restrict socialism, the United States has built an all-round system of military strength, economic influence and cultural ideals. Cuba, Chile and Panama have each been justified by the United States as necessary for the cause of freedom and the American Dream, but they have also become areas of American economic and ideological dominance. First, a brief overview of the related research and the theoretical system of this paper are presented below. Next, the paper will present the ideological rationale for containment and then list the three cases and a comparison study.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Historiography on U.S. imperialism in Latin America shows that there are serious disagreements among scholars about whether to view it through the lens of realist Cold War strategy or cultural and dependency theories. Realism is the idea that in a world without a central authority, nations will focus on self-interest and security [4]. Therefore, U.S. intervention in Latin America can be viewed as a pragmatic response to the expansion of the Soviet Union rather than as empire-building. Zakia Shiraz believes that, although there are more declassified Cold War documents, they have not led to a consensus on whether or not the US engaged in clandestine operations [5].

Jack Devine, a former CIA officer, proposes a particular form of the realist or defensive theory. In his work on Chile, he maintains that the agency did not plan or lead the 1973 coup and presents American involvement as a small-scale attempt to prevent instability and Soviet influence [6]. Others think it is too generous. Lubna Qureshi thinks that the language of containment was in fact used to safeguard the interests of American corporations in the copper and telecommunications sectors that were under threat from Salvador Allende's nationalization plan [7]. Therefore, the discussion is not only about whether the United States intervened, but also about whether such intervention should be classified as security policy, corporate protection, or a new form of informal empire.

Latin American historians and political theorists have also begun to study the cultural and ideological forms through which the imperial system has survived, rather than focusing solely on military and economic force. Raúl Rodríguez and Harry Targ believe that U.S. policies in Cuba aimed to prevent the spread of communism and also to stop a "Cuban model" of revolution that had challenged U.S. dominance and offered an alternative way of life [8]. Aníbal Quijano's theory of the coloniality of power can explain how old hierarchies of culture, knowledge and development persist even after the end of formal colonial rule [9]. Together, these works show that modern imperialism also acts to mould the aspirations, identities and ideas of progress of the people.

This paper refers to the system of "U.S. informal imperialism" to describe a situation in which Latin American countries were nominally independent but had made political choices, economic decisions and strategic choices in the interest of a dominant country. Therefore, imperialism did not only involve military force. Economic leverage, covert operations, control of the infrastructure, cultural appeal and the idea that US leadership stood for freedom were also part of it. Therefore, this paper is closer to the views of Qureshi, Shiraz, Rodríguez, Targ,

and Quijano than to those that are strictly realistic, but it still recognizes that the security concerns of the Cold War affected U.S. policymakers.

3. Method and Case Selection

The method of historical comparison will be used here. Not all U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War are covered here. Instead, Cuba, Chile and Panama have been selected because they present three different forms of the informal empire. Cuba shows economic dependence, military intervention and the conflict among various models of modernity. Chile is a typical case of covert operations, credit constraints and the destabilisation of a democratic socialist project. Panama shows strategic infrastructure control and the limits of formal sovereignty.

These cases are also beneficial as they link the pre-Cold War and Cold War forms of U.S. influence. Cuba and Panama are typical cases of American imperial practices before the Cold War, and Chile shows how anti-communism provided a new drive and justification for such measures. The sources for the above content include declassified US documents, official State Department materials, congressional reports, presidential and revolutionary speeches, and secondary research. The goal is not to construct a complete archive of the original essay, but rather to organise the argument of the original essay in a more structured academic system.

4. Containment and the Ideological Logic of Informal Empire

Before studying the systems of ideas in politics that both the United States and the Soviet Union promoted during the Cold War, one needs to know about this period. Prior to the Marshall Plan and other initiatives, there was already a sense of mistrust. George Kennan presented the Soviet Union in his Long Telegram of 1946 as a large-scale power that needed to be contained for a long time through various means [10]. The Truman Doctrine thus promised to help "free peoples" resist subjugation by virtue of ideology and provided a practical basis for foreign policy [11].

Containment gave rise to a new style of rhetoric for expressing American power. Capitalism and democracy are portrayed as the foundations for civilisation and liberty, thus reducing the perception of foreign intervention as one of aggression. Therefore, in practice, the United States often supported authoritarian governments as long as they were anti-communist. In the Cold War, US policymakers in Latin America viewed left-wing nationalism, land reform and democratic socialism as security risks; thus, although they arose from local efforts to promote fairness and autonomy, they did not receive sympathy from the US.

Culture has also been formed. American abundance, such as cars and appliances, Hollywood films, popular music, Coca-Cola and images of consumer comfort, was in sharp contrast to Soviet austerity. Joseph Nye later referred to this attraction as soft power, the capacity to persuade by appeal rather than coercion [12]. To the outside world, the appeal of Hollywood and consumer goods could be as potent as that of the CIA or NATO because they presented the United States not only as a political system but also as an ideal way of life.

Cultural imperialism is now in doubt. Claude-Jean Bertrand believed that "polemical" is an overly strong word because it assumes a passive audience and fails to consider the fact that American cultural products were often adapted by foreign publics [13]. It is a warning. Bertrand's criticism does not consider that cultural choice has never been free of economic power. American films, advertisements and consumer goods spread around the world because US corporations had the funds, distribution systems and political influence to make them widely available.

Therefore, cultural imperialism should not be identified as the single reason for the rise of the United States, nor should it be entirely ignored. Culture supported the economic and political system that supported US power. Aspirationalism is used in this paper to refer to the change from admiring American freedom, consumption and modernity to being gently influenced by them. Aspiration did not require the people to accept U.S. power, but it helped make the American model of progress seem normal and desirable. Latin America had this culture but also faced war and economic problems.

5. Cuba: Dependency, Intervention, and Competing Models of Modernity

Cuba is a typical case of how the older system of informal empire was changed under the Cold War. The origins of US involvement can be traced back to the Spanish-American War in 1898, when the United States intervened in the Cuban war of independence from Spain. U.S. newspapers sensationalised the Spanish atrocities in the form of "yellow journalism", and after the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana harbour, public anger surged [14, 15]. Although the war was short, its impact has been felt for a long time. The Spanish empire in the Americas collapsed, Cuba achieved formal independence, and US influence on the political life of the island continues to this day.

The Platt Amendment granted Washington the right to use military force in Cuban affairs and helped establish a long-term US Navy base at Guantanamo Bay [16]. As Lars Schoultz says, Cuba was "free but not independent"; it was a protectorate-type country that was formally sovereign but under the direction of a powerful nation [17]. The arrangement reveals the logic of informal empire — sovereignty in name, dependence in practice. Therefore, long before the Cold War, Cuba had already served as a laboratory for U.S. power.

Cuba was still in relatively close proximity to the United States in the first half of the 20th century. Sugar accounted for a considerable proportion of the economy, and American enterprises were also engaged in banks, utilities, oil refineries, and so on [18]. Havana was also a centre for American consumerism, and there were casinos, high-end tourist hotels, nightclubs, imported entertainment, and so on. The pre-Cold War model of empire was based on economic power and cultural attraction, and although it was politically independent in name, it was not economically independent in fact.

The Cuban Revolution has changed the form of dependence. Batista's government was generally disliked due to corruption, and in 1959, Fidel Castro and his people took power. Castro's movement was originally nationalist and left-wing, not merely a Soviet initiative. In *History Will Absolve Me*, he put forward a plan for land reform, social justice and national sovereignty [19]. He nationalised U.S.-owned oil refineries, banks and large-scale estates under the government. The US used economic sanctions and therefore, Cuba sold sugar and other goods to the Soviet Union.

Thus, the mode of dependence has been inverted rather than abolished. Cuba broke with the U.S. economic system and joined the Soviet sphere. The United States would be losing a trading partner as well as the centre of regional decision-making; therefore, this loss would be more serious. Therefore, the Cuban case also supports the argument that the Cold War was not an event of American imperialism but rather a clash of economies, ideologies (socialism vs. capitalism), and modernities.

The Bay of Pigs Invasion is a typical case of this. President Eisenhower and President Kennedy came up with this plan to overthrow Castro by allowing Cuban exiles back into Cuba and organising internal disorder. The plan was based on the fact that the United States would not be held responsible. However, the invasion did not succeed in a few days; Castro strengthened the revolutionary cause by winning the war and sought Soviet support in Cuba [20]. In

attempting to hide the US role, it turned out that there was an informal empire; however, by doing so, it became visible enough to harm its own claims of defending freedom.

Cuba was also a region of cultural conflict. Batista's Cuba was a product of American consumerism. In 1959, Fidel Castro introduced a new kind of social order and equality through education and other reforms. This socialist ideal was not the same as the American Dream of consumerism and plenty. Neither model was easy. Cuba's equality came at the expense of freedom, and American consumerism often included inequality and dependence. The conflict among models shows that the informal empire also produced different versions of modernity in different places.

6. Chile: Democratic Socialism, Covert Action, and Economic Destabilisation

The US experience in Cuba showed that the containment policy could not control the spread of communism and thus had failed in America itself. To prevent a "second Cuba", the Washington administration increased restrictions on political freedom in Latin America. In 1970, after being elected, President Salvador Allende brought attention to the situation in Washington, D.C. Chile thus represents a case where the defence of ideology became linked to the maintenance of influence.

In 1970, Allende led the Popular Unity coalition to win the first free and fair elections for a Marxist-led government in the world. Allende nationalised copper mines that were run by Anaconda and Kennecott, other sectors, and promoted land reform. Many Chileans believed that these reforms would be a path for the country to reach socialism and achieve equality democratically [21].

Washington had a different kind of fear in Chile. If socialism could be realised by election, then anti-communist containment would no longer be limited to preventing guerrilla revolution and Soviet military expansion. It would also need to prevent the democratic socialist experiments from becoming popular models. Qureshi reports that the US authorities designated Allende a danger because he was somewhat close to Moscow and to the functioning of the government within the Chilean constitution [7].

Declassified materials and Congressional inquiries show that the United States used a two-track strategy to weaken Allende's government. The first was political and economic pressure; the second sought to stop Allende from being too powerful. The Church Committee reported that U.S. covert operations in Chile from 1963 to 1973 included financing for opposition parties, propaganda and the establishment of media organizations such as *El Mercurio* [22]. It was not an official annexation, but a reduction in the political independence of Chile.

The foundation of this informal empire was economic exploitation. Nixon's order to "make the economy scream" showed that credit and investment would be used to put pressure on it [23]. The US reduced the loans and foreign banks pulled back from Chile. At the same time, the foreign-funded enterprises also asked for protection of their property from Washington. Through the above measures, U.S. power did not exercise open military occupation to create a situation where a sovereign government could not be established.

In November 1973, there was a military coup and thus a crisis. The United States did not have to order all actions of the Chilean military under an imperial system. There were many reasons for the actions of this group; among them were hostility towards Allende and economic problems. Augusto Pinochet led a coup and then established a brutal dictatorship without the Constitution. Thus, Chile shows that a country can be formally independent yet still have limited political space due to external forces.

Pinochet's dictatorship used Chile as the site for market-oriented reforms. The American school of economic thought, also known as the Chicago School, proposed liberalisation of the economy through privatisation and deregulation. Therefore, the informal empire operated by way of covert actions and reformulating economic common sense. Allende hoped that socialism would be democratic, but Pinochet and his supporters believed that in order to defend Western civilisation and the economy, authoritarianism had to be adopted. Power functioned in terms of both force and language once again.

7. Panama: Strategic Infrastructure and the Limits of Sovereignty

Cuba and Chile are typical cases of informal empires realised through revolution, containment and regime destabilisation; Panama is another example of American dominance via control over strategic infrastructure. By 1914, the Panama Canal had been built, and thus the United States had increased both trade and military travel along the West and East Coasts of the United States. Although Panama had formally separated from Colombia in 1903 and been supported by the United States, the Canal Zone was still under US administration at that time. Walter LaFeber considered the canal a typical instance of American imperialism in Latin America [24]. Panama's relations with the United States during the Cold War were thus unevenly distributed. Although the US government said it would be a free-trade area for all nations, it actually installed a base for US naval power and reduced Panama's political independence. Thus, on the grounds of security, the US policymakers held that only the United States could ensure the safety of the canal from communist subversion or other geopolitical risks. For many Panamanians, the Canal Zone was no longer free.

In 1964, there was a high-tension period when Panamanian students attempted to hoist their national flag in the Canal Zone and were subsequently attacked. The riots and deaths forced both governments to face the problem of an unsustainable arrangement [25]. Many Latin Americans were told by this episode that the U.S. was ruling them as a colony, even though Panama was technically independent. The contradiction was the same as that in Cuba and Chile. There was a formal sovereign nation, but a necessary part of life for the people had fallen under US control.

In 1977, Omar Torrijos and US President Jimmy Carter signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties to transfer control of the Panama Canal to Panama by 1999 [26]. Therefore, the treaties indicated that direct US administration could not continue indefinitely without prompting resistance. At the same time, there was no suppression of informal influence either. Although the United States did not formally govern the Canal Zone, it was still closely connected economically and strategically, and also had regional influence in that area.

In light of the broader context of the Cold War, Panama was less directly a case about communism and more about geopolitics. Control of the canal meant control of a key route for trade and military deployment. Any defiance of the US government could be regarded as an occasion for the spread of Soviet ideas in North America. Therefore, the post-1999 Panama shows how U.S. power can continue to be exerted in a less conspicuous way through trade, investment, finance and security relations [27]. This case shows that informal empire was not always a grand one; sometimes it took the form of infrastructure, treaties, and the long-term organisation of economic life.

The Panama Canal is also compared to the previous imperial powers. Britain ruled some areas in the world, so the Suez Canal in Egypt and other ports were needed for trade. In both cases, the purpose of the domination was stated as responsibility for the protection of free trade, security and international order. However, locally autonomous initiatives that hindered the economic plan of the greater market were deemed to have forfeited sovereignty. Therefore, Panama shows that modern empire can be achieved without formal annexation.

8. Discussion: Three Mechanisms of Informal Empire

The three cases show that the U.S. informal empire in Cold War Latin America was not a single policy but a flexible system. Cuba was under economic dependence, had a large navy, and was covertly supported at different times. Under financial constraints, covertly organised operations and the ideological designation of democratic socialism as a security threat took place in Chile. In Panama, it exercised control over key facilities and treaties to reduce the scope of national power. Together, these cases show that although the United States may claim to respect the formal independence of these countries, it has also shaped their actual choices.

Therefore, the purpose of the Cold War was not to create American imperialism *de novo*. It provided the language for legitimation instead. Anti-communism altered the former mode of economic control, military intervention and cultural assimilation into what appeared to be a defence. Intervention can be viewed as the protection of democracy; economic pressure can be considered a way to stop the spread of communism; and cultural hegemony is often referred to as the free appeal of the American Dream. Therefore, the Cold War gave U.S. imperialism a modern form despite having older structures.

The cases also show that cultural aspirationalism should be regarded as a supporting factor rather than a complete reason. American films, consumer products and images of abundance did not overthrow governments or control canals on their own. However, they made U.S.-led capitalism seem normal, modern and desirable. Together with covert action and economic power, this cultural appeal strengthened the entire system of informal empires.

9. Conclusion

The three case studies show how the United States developed a typical model of modern soft power during the Cold War. It was not a direct colonial administration of the past. Instead, it was carried out by military force, covert operations, economic dependence, strategic infrastructure and cultural aspiration, and all supported by an ideology that described domination as the defence of democracy. Ideology also served to justify the intervention.

To call it imperialism is to see the contradiction in the U.S. Cold War policy. Although the United States claimed to be a liberator and not a colonizer, in practice, many of its systems of dependence and subordination were the same as those of previous imperial powers. The Cold War created a new form for them. Interventions were justified as universal and even altruistic, but in practice, they limited sovereignty and reshaped society according to the interests of the United States.

Therefore, the answer to the original question is also limited. U.S. imperialism did not originate during the Cold War, and American influence in Cuba and Panama had been present for a long time before. What the Cold War achieved was a reconfiguration of American imperialism by merging older soft-power controls with anti-communist ideas and the idea of a better life. It should not be said that the United States is a bad force; rather, one should focus on the internal contradictions of modern power and the fundamental contradictions in the Cold War era — an informal empire that intended to protect freedom but did so restrictively.

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