

A SWORD CUTS TWO WAYS: Cold War Policymaking in the OAS

by ARAGORN STORM MILLER

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HISTORIAN GADDIS SMITH REGARDS the Organization of American States as the ultimate expression of the Monroe Doctrine and the U.S. assertion of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Others, like Carolyn M. Shaw, suggest that

the U.S.–Latin American relationship within the OAS featured varying degrees of cooperation, resistance, and assertion by all members. In a sense, both scholars are correct and incorrect. On one hand, the OAS provided a salve for U.S. existential Cold War concerns; the organization could be a powerful juridical tool to ensure regional security and resist the Communist menace. On the other hand, Latin Americans found in the OAS long-sought enshrinement of democracy and nonintervention as foundations of the inter-American system. As the OAS evolved from a theoretical to practical tool, however, a curious dynamic emerged. The smooth conduct of U.S. policy was impossible without the presence of the OAS, but Latin Americans often proved more influential in the forging of hemispheric policy. Indeed, in most cases it was only when certain Latin American leaders felt threatened—typically by the policies of other Latin American nations, rather than by the United States—that the more powerful pieces of OAS legislation emerged. When the U.S. Eisenhower administration sought to contain Fidel Castro, Latin Americans kept the focus on Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. The 1962 Punta del Este Declaration that framed Communism as an un-American ideology came about only after much horse-trading and arm-twisting by the United States. The August 1964 censorship of Cuba—ostensibly serving U.S. interests—resulted primarily from the efforts of Romulo Betancourt of Venezuela. Decades after the Cold War, we continue to wrestle with the riddle of the OAS: the ideological and

diplomatic contours of the Cold War made the organization vital to the United States, yet the body often thwarted U.S. policymaking and made Latin Americans the prime movers—and perhaps hegemonic actors—in the inter-American relationship of the 1950s and 1960s.

Although the United States had presented itself as a champion of American security since President James Monroe’s famous (or infamous) declaration of 1823, it was not until the beginning of the Cold War that U.S. policymakers felt compelled to create a formal, collective security system. Old fears, that European empires would nibble at the edges of the hemisphere in an ideologically neutral positive-sum game, gave way to new fears that an ideologically driven Soviet empire would absorb undeveloped regions as well as the United States itself in a zero-sum game. The United States and the West would resist, wearing down and discrediting the communist system through a policy of containment and indirect confrontation. Such a struggle could only be won, however, if Washington cast itself as a reliable champion of democratic values, and cultivated a roster of allies that would bear the ideological and real burdens of the long struggle. With the Act of Chapultepec, Rio Treaty, and Act of Bogotá, the United States and the twenty republics of Latin America created the Organization of American States and enshrined principles of democracy, equality, cooperation, and, perhaps most important, united resistance to direct or indirect aggression toward any party nation. Gone were earlier notions, like those of the Roosevelt Corollary, that the United States would be the sole arbiter of security and responsible governance. But because of the inordinate power of the United States, and the fact that only the United States had vested interests throughout the hemisphere, it was at least implicit that the sensibilities of an earlier era were still in play.

Yet the dynamics of the Cold War tended to level the playing field between the superpowers and the developing and decolonizing world. As thinkers like Walt W. Rostow noted, the advent of nuclear weapons and ideological blocs meant that there could be no dictation of terms, either by the superpowers against one another or by the superpowers against less powerful nations. Instead, the allegiance of a given smaller country was a highly valuable commodity, since dictation would only create a propaganda opportunity for the other side. In the American context, Washington had to balance competing needs. It could not afford to allow leftist influence to pare off regional governments, but neither could it appear heavy-handed in establishing an anti-communist quarantine. The OAS was the ideal forum in which to maintain such a united front, but there were twenty nations with which to contend, and only the most skillful propaganda and diplomacy could suggest that the interests of the United States and Latin America tended to be identical.

This situation persisted in the first decade of the OAS's existence, such that the United States found it easier to work outside the framework of the organization. The 1954 CIA intervention in Guatemala provided the clearest example of this trend. In the run-up to the Ninth International Conference of American States, scheduled for March, U.S. and Latin American foreign ministers strongly disagreed over priorities. The Latin Americans made it clear that they remained far more interested in addressing economic underdevelopment than U.S. concerns about the Red Menace in places like Guatemala, where Washington was concerned that democratically elected President José Arevalo had veered dangerously leftward. Argentina and Mexico voiced particularly strong opposition, suggesting that Washington might use the OAS as a cover for unilateral intervention in this case or in the future. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles succeeded in shepherding through a declaration of American solidarity against Communism, but only after promising increased U.S. aid, and only after fifty ballots had been taken. As the Eisenhower administration focused on plans for an invasion of Guatemala by exile Carlos Castillo Armas, Washington prepared a case for presentation to the OAS only as a last resort. Eisenhower and his aides reasoned that, in light of the

hard sell needed to gain the vaguely worded Caracas Resolution, obtaining Latin American support for decisive action against Guatemala would be nearly impossible.

The U.S. general avoidance of the OAS as a policymaking tool continued until Fidel Castro took power in Cuba and began a program of land reform and other potentially leftist policies. Yet in this case the bulk of attention of the OAS members centered on Rafael Trujillo, a close U.S. ally who increasingly pushed the already-broad precedents of authoritarian rule in the Americas. During 1956 and 1957, the FBI and State Department had investigated the disappearances of Trujillo critic Jesús Galindez, and Robert Murphy, a U.S. citizen working for Dominican Airlines. The United States determined that the Trujillo regime had been directly involved in the deaths of the two men. Yet Trujillo's willingness to work in lockstep with U.S. diplomatic and military policy encouraged the Eisenhower administration to pass only mild sanctions. By the summer of 1959, however, the democratic but nonetheless nationalist Romulo Betancourt had replaced dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela and had joined Castro in a heated rhetorical—and sometimes military—duel with Trujillo. A curious dynamic thus emerged: Eisenhower tried to muzzle Trujillo while currying Betancourt's support against Castro; Trujillo and Castro stridently defied each of the other three; and Betancourt intimated that he would support anti-Castro measures only after Eisenhower assisted Venezuelan efforts against Trujillo in the OAS.

For the next year, the OAS served primarily as a forum for Latin American criticism of Trujillo—and by extension U.S. policy in the hemisphere—rather than a forum for the U.S. fight against Castro and communism. The August 1959 meetings in Santiago, Chile, served as an indirect attack against Trujillo's human rights violations and established a precedent for future OAS human rights commissions. The following year, Trujillo stepped up his campaign against Betancourt, sending aircraft to drop anti-government leaflets over Caracas—though the Dominican planes accidentally flew over the Dutch island of Curacao—and ordering an assassination attempt against him. Betancourt survived a June 1960 car bombing and spearheaded an immediate convening of the OAS in San José, Costa Rica. The August meetings determined that the Trujillo government had indeed been

involved in these interventions, and called on the American states to break diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic. During the summer of 1960, meanwhile, Cuba had begun expropriations of U.S.-owned sugar plantations and threatened U.S. oil interests, compelling the Eisenhower administration to attempt to secure OAS support for collective intervention in future cases where an American republic might threaten the interests of another. Again, Latin Americans resisted these veiled attacks against Cuba. From their perspective, there was a wide gulf between the direct intervention that Trujillo had pursued, and the more ambiguous policy Castro executed in Cuba. When Eisenhower broke ties with Cuba, in January 1961, only Venezuela and Colombia followed suit. Even this development owed principally to the fact that Castro had increasingly turned his ire against these nations rather than from acquiescence to U.S. desires.

During the spring and summer of 1961, Castro's neighbors in the Caribbean basin became increasingly nervous about his political bent and sought to use the OAS as a means to protect their national security. In May Castro had affirmed himself as a Communist and as an ally of the Soviet Union, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pledged armed support to the island in the case of armed aggression. Cuba also began broadcasting propaganda throughout the region, calling for the leftist overthrow of sitting governments. By year's end, Peru and Colombia succeeded in calling for a meeting of foreign ministers at Punta del Este, Uruguay, in January 1962 to consider the problem of Cuban aggression and alignment with the Soviet Union. The United States was of course highly in favor of such a meeting. Yet Washington failed to achieve its goals of getting the rest of Latin America to break relations with Cuba and to enforce harsh economic sanctions. Mexico and the Southern Cone were openly opposed, and it took promises of increased U.S. economic aid to get nations like Uruguay and Haiti on board. Ultimately, the United States acceded to a compromise in which Cuba would be determined to be violating the OAS charter and Caracas Resolution by being under the control of the alien ideology of Communism, and the extra-hemispheric control of the Soviet Union, and therefore suspended from participation in the OAS. Despite this compromise, consensus remained elusive. Ultimately, the vote to suspend Cuba barely achieved the

necessary two-thirds margin to pass, being 14–1 with six abstentions. Again, Washington tended to find itself thwarted by the assertive nations of Latin America in the Cold War context.

The unprecedented OAS sanctions that ostracized Cuba—so long a goal of the United States—occurred primarily as a result of Venezuelan President Romulo Betancourt's feud with Castro. During 1962 Cuba had begun a major effort to train leftists throughout the hemisphere and return them to their home countries as revolutionaries. In 1963 Venezuela became the epicenter of these subversive efforts, as guerrillas and urban terrorists associated with the Venezuelan Communist Party and Leftist Revolutionary Movement sought to disrupt presidential elections scheduled for December, perhaps setting the stage for a series of coups that would usher them into power. While anecdotal evidence existed that these sorts of activities occurred, neither the United States nor Venezuela could offer concrete proof of Cuban intervention in domestic affairs. In November, however, the Venezuelan National Guard discovered a three-ton arms cache on the Paraguana Peninsula near the border with Colombia. Subsequent tests proved that the weapons were of Cuban origin, and Betancourt and his successor, Raul Leoni, sought to bring Castro to account within the context of the OAS. Working closely with the United States, Venezuela sought the concurrence of the rest of the hemisphere in breaking relations with Cuba, and in the establishment of an embargo of all trade in nonhumanitarian goods. As before, however, there proved to be limits beyond which even close U.S. allies like Venezuela would not go. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas C. Mann spearheaded U.S. efforts to use the Paraguana arms discovery as a justification for collective military force against Castro. Throughout the spring of 1964, Mann and the State Department crafted what they termed a "blank check" to be attached to any eventual resolution coming out of the OAS meetings. If Cuba could be found guilty of both direct and indirect intervention in the affairs of Venezuela—thus violating the Rio Treaty as well as the OAS and UN charters—the United States might also secure an authorization for unilateral armed force in case of a similar future incident without having to return to the OAS for an explicit authorization. Perhaps because several other Latin American nations perceived

the implications of such a blanket authorization of force, Mann's "blank check" was a nonstarter. Ultimately, the Venezuelan drive for severed relations and an embargo carried the day by a 15–4 vote. By November, however, the United States could feel gratified, as every Latin American nation with the exception of Mexico had broken off diplomatic relations with Cuba.

While obviously the United States succeeded in carrying out the major contours of its anti-Castro policy within the OAS framework, Washington was often forced to wait until Latin Americans provided the critical mass for punitive action. At least in the pivotal years of the OAS—the 1950s and 1960s—Latin American democratic forces and Latin American strongmen were the prime movers in determining the boundaries of debate. Trujillo had succeeded in perfecting the institution of the caudillo during three decades of rule, and might have extended his dictatorship another decade had he not engaged in a reckless campaign against his neighbors. Despite the fact that such dictatorships violated the OAS Charter guarantee of democratic governance—a fact that Betancourt was fond of stressing—the United States was willing to overlook the problem. When Trujillo sought to export his despotism, Washington had little choice other than to cashier its ally and support Latin American initiatives. Washington, further, was forced to wait three years for the rest of Latin America to accede to its desire to fully isolate Cuba politically. And again, this outcome centered on Castro's decision to export his revolution in the form of arms deliveries to Venezuelan leftists. Absent the missteps of these antidemocratic leaders, U.S. use of the OAS would have been even more complicated than it was. The OAS provides a unique window into the complexity of U.S. policymaking, and U.S.–Latin American relations, in the Cold War context. The centrality of ideology to the geopolitical showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union tended to make rhetoric as important as reality. The United States needed to be able to point to evidence that it was on the side of justice and democracy, both in terms of its policies and dealings with the wider world. Bodies like the UN, NATO, and the OAS served these functions to an extent. But the emphasis on collectivism also served to restrict the United States. The relationship with Latin America starkly illustrated such a

problem. Having shepherded the creation of what ought to have been a powerful tool for the exertion of hegemony, Washington often had to ignore the OAS altogether, or wait until Latin Americans partially endorsed U.S. policy, so that the "mousetrap" functioned in the way that the United States had intended.

Aragorn Storm Miller is a doctoral candidate in the UT Department of History. 🌟

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