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## JOHN F. KENNEDY'S ALLIANCE FOR PROGRESS: AN ORIGIN STORY

Michael Davis

John F. Kennedy won the 1960 presidential election on the strength of his photogenic beat down of Vice President Richard Nixon in their televised debate, but it was also on the back of his biting criticism of the Eisenhower administration's Cold War foreign policy. As a junior senator from Massachusetts in the late 1950s, Kennedy developed relationships with social scientists and scholars like Walt Whitman Rostow. Rostow's economic theories and social scientific perspective on foreign policy generated a movement that shifted hemispheric policy away from non-intervention and free-trade promotion towards a development-led policy to address root causes of stagnant modernization in Latin America. This shift in policy objectives would culminate in the Alliance for Progress— a multilateral proposal for regional cooperation in security, democracy promotion, and aid-assisted development policies to propel Latin American economies into later stages of modernization.

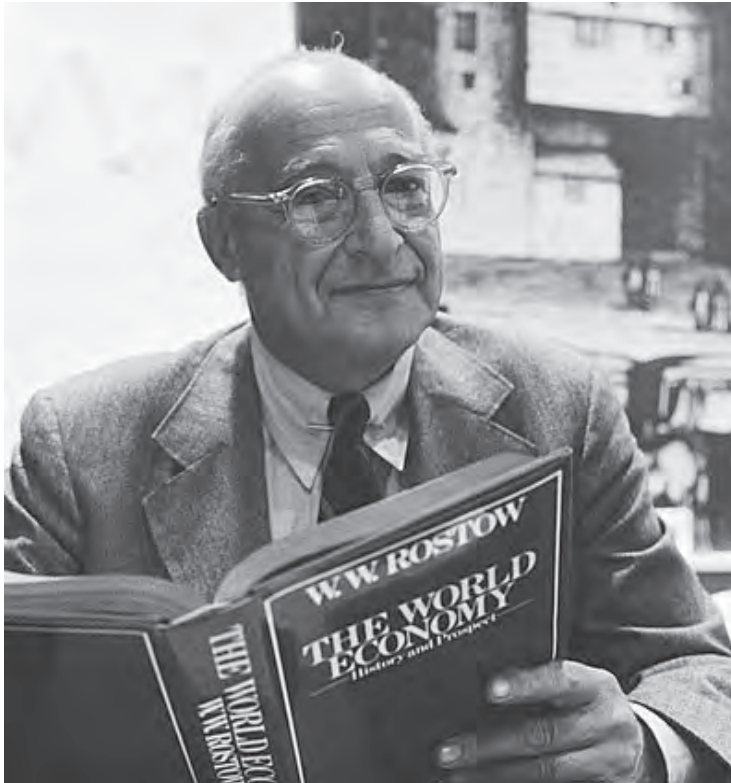
In his book *Rostow, Kennedy, and the Rhetoric of Foreign Aid*, Kimber Charles Pearce gives a detailed account of the social scientific revolution in United States foreign policy circles in the 1950s and early 1960s. Pearce traces the origins of Kennedy's Alliance back to Rostow's co-founding of the Center for International Studies at MIT in 1951 with fellow social scientific revolutionary Max Milliken. Rostow and Milliken set out to counter Marxist theories of economic development and establish an intellectual defense for social and economic development policies dictated by state action, but also defined by democratic and liberal economic philosophies. In his book *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, Stephen Rabe places the Alliance for Progress in the context of social scientific shifts in policymaking and the needed response to Castro's revolution, which precipitated

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the incoming Kennedy administration's move towards a more comprehensive development strategy in Latin America. Like Pearce, Rabe works from the conventional historiographical perspective that places the United States as the hegemonic authority in an asymmetric power relationship with the rest of the Americas. In contrast, Christopher Darnton reexamines the origins of the Alliance from the perspective of the Latin American nations, several of which, he argues, had a more significant impact on both the creation of the Alliance as well as influence over wider regional policy creation. In an extensive article in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2012), Darnton questions the conventional narrative and makes a compelling argument for a Latin American origin story for the Alliance for Progress. Darnton's revision of the dominant narrative also speaks to the need to reimagine how sub-hegemonic powers in the region influence policy and promote



Professor WW Rostow (US) gives press conference about his book *The World Economy*. 1978. Wikimedia Commons.

their own interests in the face of a seemingly overwhelming hegemonic authority. The origins of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress inform not only the historical context of United States/Latin American relations during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, but also our understanding of power relationships and policy creation in Western Hemispheric geopolitics.

Walt Whitman Rostow received a PhD in economics from Yale, served with distinction during WWII in the OSS and the British Air Ministry, and made a significant contribution to the recovery effort and administration of the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe. He took this experience into a post-war career in academia and politics where his economic development theories would impact policy and provide a

foundation for the ideology of modernization. The 1950s saw a social scientific revolution bubbling in U.S. foreign policy circles responding both to the challenge of rebuilding Europe after WWII and the subsequent rash of decolonization that created dozens of new nations, most of which were equally devastated by war or revolution.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of a binary geopolitical situation with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. as dueling superpowers established the framework within which all foreign policy for the next forty years would be defined. The academics and policymakers in the U.S. saw foreign aid as a primary battlefield on which to wage the emerging Cold War. Foreign aid policies coming out of Moscow in the 1950s worried the Eisenhower administration, and they turned to men like Rostow and Milliken to formulate the U.S. response. Rostow's theories of development, which would be termed "modernization theory," focused on the root causes of stagnant development and promoted direct foreign aid to promote liberal reforms and push the Third World into the later stages of economic modernization.<sup>2</sup> Rostow and Milliken's Center for International Studies (CENIS) was only one of many think tanks that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to influence and lobby government policy. CENIS seems to have distinguished itself from other similar organizations through its extended period of influence and the attention it attracted from a junior senator from Massachusetts and soon-to-be president of the United States, John F. Kennedy.<sup>3</sup>

American foreign policy in the 1950s was focused on the emerging Cold War. George Kennan's "Long Telegram" had become doctrine, and containment of expanding Soviet influence had become the central issue for the State Department and administration policymakers. Foreign aid and development assistance was an important aspect of Soviet foreign policy in the postwar world. Communist victory in China was followed by long-term development plans where Soviet officials focused on trade, technological innovations,

and assistance loans to drag developing nations into the modern industrial economy.<sup>4</sup> Rostow lobbied hard for a U.S. response to what many saw as Soviet economic imperialism threatening to spread communist influence throughout the Third World. Eisenhower administration policy consisted of mostly short-term, case-by-case aid packages and military assistance to counter Soviet economic and military aggression. Looking to establish himself as a new force in the Democratic Party, Kennedy seized on the perception of Eisenhower's failed policy as a possible political weakness, and he sent his policy staff to MIT to consult with Rostow about development policies in Asia and Western Europe. The myriad inchoate nations emerging from a post-war world and rampant decolonization provided the battleground between democratic liberal capitalism and Soviet-style communism. For Rostow and his new political beacon of light, JFK, the new long-term Soviet aid programs would spread communist soft power to Third World nations desperate for development assistance and pliable to ideological persuasion. Richard Nixon's cursed trip to South America in 1958, during which the vice president was pelted with criticism, abuse, and even some projectiles by student protestors in Peru and Venezuela, provided a political opportunity for Kennedy to poke at Eisenhower's failed Cold War policies and served to turn the attentions of policymakers to the growing instability in the Latin American region.<sup>5</sup>

Rostow's ideas emerged during the final months of the Eisenhower administration in response to two important events. First, Castro's successful revolution in Cuba in 1959 sent shockwaves through the State Department and foreign policy circles. Fear of dominos falling in the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America pushed hemispheric policy to the forefront and motivated a reassessment of U.S. policy in the region. Second, then Senator John F. Kennedy pointed to Nixon's violent reception in South America as

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evidence of the existential threat posed by revolutionary movements in Latin America. Kennedy used Rostow's rhetoric to criticize the Eisenhower administration for ignoring the “economic gap” and avoiding the real social issues at the heart of the modernization process. Kennedy began to lay the foundation for promoting “peaceful revolution” through capitalist development based on classical liberal economics.<sup>6</sup> Eisenhower took his own goodwill tour of South America early in 1960 to allay fears of the growing hemispheric instability and combat criticism of his Latin American policy, which still hinged on military alliances and regional trade pacts. The senator made Latin American policy a centerpiece of his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president. Rostow's ideas of development aid and classical liberal economic policy would inform Kennedy's announcement of his plan for Latin America. In a callback to Franklin D. Roosevelt's “Good Neighbor” policy, Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress as a comprehensive plan to promote development through assistance, liberal land reform, cooperation with the Organization of American States (OAS) and regional organizations to promote goodwill, and a

reorganization of the State Department to enlist diplomats who were well versed in Latin America and more qualified to administer the new change in policy.<sup>7</sup> According to Pearce, Rostow's economic stages of development and the social scientific approach to modernization provided Kennedy with a "rhetorical framework that addressed the two issues [of anti-communism and economic progress] simultaneously by wedding an anti-Marxist philosophy and a comprehensive vision of the process of social development."<sup>8</sup> Rostow's "fervent anti-communism" provided cover for his left-leaning ideas about social development and his insistence that the state play a prominent role in actively promoting development policy in emerging modernizing nations.<sup>9</sup> For Pearce, the origin story of the Alliance for Progress is one of progressive academic ideas permeating policymaking circles and catching the ear of a political genius during a seminal moment in the history of U.S. policy in Latin America.

Like Pearce, Stephen G. Rabe analyzes the origins and the fate of the Alliance for Progress from the asymmetrical U.S. hegemonic perspective. Rabe analyzes many aspects of Kennedy's Latin American foreign policy from military aid and engagement to covert operations and counterinsurgency policies. That said, Rabe feels strongly enough about the significance of the Alliance to devote a large portion of his monograph to the development aid policy. Rabe asks a few questions in his introduction to his study. First, is the Alliance evidence of a real shift in U.S. foreign policy, or "just another Cold War weapon of the United States?"<sup>10</sup> Next, what similarities or differences are evident between Kennedy's Alliance and the progressive interventions in the early years of the 20th century? In Rabe's words, "was the Alliance part of the customary United States search for hegemony in the Western Hemisphere?"<sup>11</sup> And finally, what were the different factors that contributed to the ultimate failure of the regional development policy?<sup>12</sup> Rabe analyzes archival research from

presidential libraries, published and unpublished government records and manuscripts, and an exhaustive selection of media reports and secondary academic sources to tell the story of Kennedy's multi-leveled approach to Latin American foreign policy. Rabe characterizes the failure of the Alliance as second only to the political and foreign policy debacle in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> The primary goal of the Alliance was to increase growth in Latin American nations that had seen stagnant rates of growth around the 1% level for much of the previous decade. Isolated examples, like Panama and Nicaragua where growth rates did exceed the 2.5% target rate, are overwhelmed by the majority of evidence that demonstrates Alliance policies were mostly unsuccessful in stimulating Latin American economies.<sup>14</sup> Despite Rabe's extensive analysis of Kennedy's Latin American policy, the origins of the Alliance are once again attributed to the charismatic president's progressive shift in response to Cuban revolution and the social scientists who informed policymakers and influenced State Department policy.

Pearce and Rabe represent the majority of scholars, who begin their analysis of Kennedy's Alliance with the revolution in Cuba and Washington's rush to establish a regional policy to prevent the spread of communism to other parts of Latin America. Within this conventional narrative, Latin American nations are secondary actors responding to U.S. hegemonic power and only participating as relatively powerless pawns in a U.S.-dominated regional policy initiative. In contrast, Christopher Darnton argues that reevaluating the origins of the Alliance provides deeper historical context to analyses of U.S. Cold War policy in Latin America, engages in historiographical disagreements to "delineate... competing perspectives,"<sup>15</sup> informs the realities behind the hegemonic narrative that rarely considers the impact of policies coming from Latin America, and shows the impact of the current regional situation that continues to look back to the Alliance



for Progress “as a model for U.S. foreign policy in the Americas.”<sup>16</sup> Darnton challenges the conventional analysis of the Alliance for Progress as a U.S.-designed, U.S.-led initiative with Latin American nations merely along for the ride. The idea of the Alliance and of development policies to address the root causes of the perceived threats to democracy, economic liberalism, and regional security were generated from both U.S. and Latin American sources.

Darnton explores Latin American sources, in addition to the conventional documents, to trace the Alliance’s origins back to Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek’s proposal for an Operation Pan-America (OPA), which predates Castro’s Cuban revolution and called for many of the progressive development strategies that would come to define the Alliance for Progress.<sup>17</sup>

According to Darnton, the “proposed partnership was less asymmetrical” than popularly imagined.<sup>18</sup> Kubitschek’s OPA kept the ideas of development and reform alive through the 1950s, when U.S. policy was trending more towards free trade, neoliberal economic theory, and protecting U.S. investment. When Castro took over in Cuba, the menu of possible U.S. responses was heavily weighted towards a multilateral approach that would certainly include many of the tenets of the OPA and Walt Rostow’s social development theories.<sup>19</sup> Cuba’s revolution and Kennedy’s election facilitated the shift in U.S. Latin American policy, but the menu of options was already developed, informed by both U.S. social scientists and Latin American voices for progressive development policies. Once the decision was made by the new Kennedy administration, it was easy to misrepresent the multilateral nature of such regional agreements as unilateral U.S. policy. The hegemon is disproportionately credited with initiatives that could not have happened without regional voices and contributions from countries like Brazil, Venezuela,



National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow showing President Lyndon B. Johnson a model of the Khe Sanh area. February 1968. By manhhai is marked with CC BY 2.0.

and Columbia, countries that Darnton calls “middle powers.”<sup>20</sup> He makes an important move to reassess the nature of multilateral relations and policy creation and incorporates influence from non-hegemonic sources into his analysis of the origins of the Alliance for Progress.

Darnton argues that the Alliance “is a story of access points and agenda setting, in which power disparities have little effect on policy outcomes.”<sup>21</sup> These “access points” include diplomatic access through individual connections, regional access through multilateral associations, and access through the outside pressure of political violence and terrorism that gives voice to those outside more conventional elements of regional policymaking.<sup>22</sup> Considering these points of access by middle powers and marginalized groups highlights the real influence imparted by Latin American voices on regional and U.S. policy, and it confuses the narrative of asymmetry and unilateralism that defines much of the scholarship of U.S. Cold War policy in Latin America. Darnton’s work contrasts against the conventional historiography of coincidence that describes the origins of the Alliance as a shift in Eisenhower-era policy to Kennedy’s development ideas

(based on Rostow's modernization theories) following the crisis in Cuba. Instead, he suggests a revision that privileges Kubitschek's OPA and the Latin American foundation for regional cooperation and consensus evidenced by the Act of Bogota—a call for a permanent OPA signed in September of 1960 months before Kennedy's Alliance speech.<sup>23</sup> By demonstrating the Latin American origins for Alliance-era development policy, Darnton not only challenges conventional wisdom, but he also suggests a new understanding of how relatively weaker powers in a region dominated by hegemonic power nevertheless have significant influence on policymaking.

Kennedy's assassination in 1963 destroyed any hope for the Alliance for Progress. The new Johnson administration immediately went to work rolling back the policy's goals of development aid and progressive reforms in favor of a return to neoliberal policies. Rabe points to Johnson's appointment of Thomas C. Mann to the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America as the death knell for the Alliance for Progress. What would become known as the "Mann doctrine" outlined U.S. policy in Latin America in terms of a focus on economic growth, a promotion and protection of U.S. investment interests, a return to non-intervention policy, and a rhetorical emphasis on anti-communism.<sup>24</sup> Others argue that the Alliance never died, and new iterations of regional agreements and shifts in U.S. policy initiatives suggest that the essential elements of the Alliance continue to influence U.S./Latin American relations. Or, as Pearce notes, the Alliance was damaged significantly by the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The covert action was, to many in Latin America, a betrayal of the stated assurances for Latin American sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>25</sup> In response, the OAS called a special meeting in August of 1961 in Punta Del Este, Uruguay. The Cuban contingent, led by Che Guevara, denounced the Alliance as a veil of progressivism

hiding the true intentions of the U.S. to solidify hegemonic authority, secure unilateral interests, and maintain economic hierarchies in the region.<sup>26</sup> For Pearce, the real issues with the Alliance were the unattainable goals set by Rostow and others for Latin American growth rates, unrealistic standards for loans, and dubious review processes that set significant barriers to achieving development aims.<sup>27</sup> Putting aside contemporary analysis of the Alliance's success and failures, its continuing legacy, or its untimely demise, a more complete understanding of the origins of the Alliance from a non-hegemonic perspective not only fills out the historiography of U.S./Latin American relations during the Cold War, but it also informs our current understanding of multilateral relationships in which power disparities often cloud agency and underestimate the influence of Latin America in US and Latin American relations.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Kimber Charles Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy, and the Rhetoric of Foreign Aid* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001), 3.
- 2 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 5.
- 3 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 12.
- 4 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 15.
- 5 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 18.
- 6 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 16.
- 7 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 25.
- 8 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 26.
- 9 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 26.
- 10 Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 7.
- 11 Rabe, *Most Dangerous*, 7.
- 12 Rabe, *Most Dangerous*, 7.
- 13 Rabe, *Most Dangerous*, 148.

- 14 Rabe, *Most Dangerous*, 149.
- 15 Christopher Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting in U.S.-Latin American Relations: Rethinking the Origins of the Alliance for Progress," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no.4 (2012): 60.
- 16 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 61.
- 17 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 57-8.
- 18 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 62.
- 11
- 19 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 62.
- 20 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 63.
- 21 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 63.
- 22 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 66.
- 23 Darnton, "Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting," 85.
- 24 Rabe, *Most Dangerous*, 177.
- 25 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 105.
- 26 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 105.
- 27 Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy*, 105-6.