

Review article

The limits of expectation: Kurt Weyland's 'Limits of US Influence'

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Writing in 2003, Max Paul Friedman was confident that 'a work of history that strongly argues the merit of US policies in the region [Latin America] or claims these have been designed principally to protect and promote freedom and democracy' would be a rarity.¹ Kurt Weyland's 2018 article – though not a work of history per se – seems to be such an outlier.² Using a fairly wide series of case studies, Weyland tests 'basic force' and 'force activation' models, coming to the 'unexpected' conclusion that 'since 1934, the Northern superpower has mostly played a fairly restrained role, has found it difficult to achieve its goals, and has seen its influence diminish over time'.³ This, to me at least, is a flabbergasting statement, and one contradicted by the vast weight of the historiography;⁴ as Darlene Rivas put it, the US was able 'to assert its power' in Latin America even when it 'focused greater attention on other regions'.⁵ The confluence of most Latin American elites' goals with those of the United States prior to 1959 is, to my mind, better framed as a victorious Cold War chapter for the US rather than not being part of the Cold War at all. This is not merely a question of periodisation or semantic disagreement however; Weyland's thesis is a rejection of the thrust of much recent historiography on anti-communism as a powerful transnational project, and one which should be considered alongside – but not in place of, nor solely as a function of – US imperialism.

This is not to say that US tactics were consistent across time. For most scholars there are watersheds: Bryce Wood, for instance, had the Good Neighbour Policy just about limping on until 1954 and the Guatemala coup; and for Chester Pach, the shift was exogenous, a 'militarization' of regional policy caused by the Korean War. To call it 'unexpected', moreover, seems rather disingenuous, since the investigation's parameters seem to have been constructed precisely to produce such an outcome, with

the bar set impossibly high: 'to guarantee compliance with its major expectations and exhortations' all without Latin America 'offering resistance on certain issues'.⁶

In other words, what was 'expected' was that – were it to be described as having significant 'clout' or 'influence', never mind imperialist hegemony – the United States would need to have achieved all of its foreign policy aims in the region without opposition. This goes so far beyond 'retiring the puppets'⁷ as to retire the United States (and indeed realism) from the discussion almost completely. Setting aside how useful such a maximalist test is, it is worth dwelling a little on those 'major expectations and exhortations'; for Weyland, 'Washington has long seen itself as the protagonist of liberal democracy in the world' and thus 'the hegemonic theory expects these interventionist efforts to produce a good deal of success'.⁸ To put it another way, since the United States' interventions in Latin America did not produce stable and lasting liberal democracies, the notion of US influence is disproved. Weyland's test, therefore, depends on taking entirely at face value the United States' frequent professions of support for democracy, while ignoring or downplaying anti-democratic interventions.

Moving beyond sins of commission, we might consider what the United States' 'mixed signals' – or indeed downright greenlighting – led to: dictatorships, human rights abuses, and at least in the case of Guatemala, genocide.⁹ Weyland proclaims – and the relief seems almost audible – that 'as Latin American elites were determined to act anyway and commanded the means to assert their interests, US influence was not crucial for the eventual outcome'. This directly follows the statement: 'the US did not need to push very hard'.¹⁰ So which is it?¹¹ In a jarring concluding volte-face, Weyland concedes that 'during the Cold War, the US prioritized anti-Communism over the institution of liberal democracy and often encouraged and supported the installation of conservative dictatorships'. This much more plausible interpretation of the period completely undermines the article's premise. If we return to the question of whether the US achieved its 'major expectations and exhortations' for the region, and plug in 'anti-Communism' instead of 'liberal democracy', then it looks pretty damned successful as a hegemon, with only Cuba in the debit column. This, though, is breezily passed over as a mere symptom of local elites' legitimate concerns: 'even without US instigation, these powerful sectors did everything they could to forestall this perceived threat'.¹² Bingo! Latin America has *always* had local elites prepared to defend their interests against reform through violent, sometimes genocidal, means. These are – I would have thought self-evidently – *not* the people with whom one allies to create liberal democracy, even if we take that desire at face value; an argument which tries to reconcile the theory of 'dos demonios' with some kind of permanent 'Good Neighbour Policy' is simply not credible. To conclude, I am aware that this summary and critique of Weyland's argument may seem mean-spirited, and it certainly should not be taken as either an *ad hominem* attack or a denigration of his other work; however, I feel that (rather like Hal Brands' bombastic apologias for a supposedly disinterested hegemon) it undermines the serious lines of argument taken by, for instance, Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long, and in different ways, Amelia Kiddle and Renata Keller, who have amply demonstrated Latin American agency without diminishing the colossal heft of the United States.

Notes

¹Friedman, 'Retiring the Puppets', 621.

²Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence'. I encountered this article in the course of researching 'Rethinking Latin America's Cold War'.

³Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence', 153.

⁴See Wood, *Dismantling of the Good Neighbor Policy*; and Pach, *Arming the Free World*.

⁵Rivas, 'United States–Latin American Relations', 230.

⁶Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence', 153.

⁷Friedman, 'Retiring the Puppets'.

⁸Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence', 157.

⁹See Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*.

¹⁰Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence', 158.

¹¹I am reminded vividly of Bart Simpson saying 'I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, there's no way you can prove anything', except here it is: the outcomes are antithetical to those we told the world we wanted, so it can't have been us, but even if we did really want those outcomes, so did local elites, so our backing was of only marginal importance.

¹²Weyland, 'Limits of US Influence', 158.

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