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Evan McCormick. "Freedom Tide?: Ideology, Politics, and the Origins of Democracy Promotion in U.S. Central America Policy, 1980–1984." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16:4 (Fall 2014): 60-109. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00516.

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Review by **Simon Miles**, University of Texas at Austin

Ronald Reagan came to the U.S. presidency at a time of considerable turbulence in the international system. Events around the world, from Central America to Afghanistan, challenged the White House's foreign policy, often simultaneously. Reagan turned to democratization and nation-building as a means of securing U.S. national interests, as well as an end in and of itself. How did democracy promotion become a legitimate objective of foreign policy, and come to be viewed as such by Republicans and Democrats alike? Evan McCormick identifies Reagan's first term as a key period in this process, demonstrating in this valuable article how the Reagan administration's confrontation with Central American revolutionary movements between 1980 and 1984 forced it to grapple with both its stated commitment to defeating communism in the region and its desire to spread U.S. political values. The ensuing Reagan Doctrine—a concept promulgated by pundits, not policy-makers—constituted a “set of ambivalent lessons learned in Central America during Reagan's first term ... [which] glorified, but also trivialized, the opportunities and costs of bringing about political change in foreign countries” (64).

Reagan, McCormick argues, had a genuine belief in the power of freedom, expressed through democracy, to overcome totalitarianism and communism. At the core of his outlook was a “geopolitical and moral anti-communism”—rejecting détente, touting the superiority of U.S. values, and insisting that ignoring Soviet expansionism only invited further aggression, especially in the United States' “backyard” (66). Reagan's ideological preoccupation, however, blinded him to both the real socioeconomic inequalities which caused this political unrest, and the brutal violence used by U.S. allies to repress it. This tension between ideals and national security concerns characterized U.S. policy in Central America and the Cold War in general.

McCormick identifies four phases in U.S. Central American policy. The first, characterized by a “Russians are coming' syndrome” spanned the first year of the Reagan administration (71). The White House struggled to translate its anti-communist worldview into concrete policy. Reagan's advisors feared a negative public reaction to a more aggressive Central American policy and were loath to shift the focus from the administration's tax cuts and its investment in the U.S. military. Military assistance won the day, however, and “democratization of any meaningful sort would have to wait” (84). The second phase saw the Reagan

administration “get the doctrine straight” (84). Reagan’s Caribbean Basin Initiative was an early step in this direction, which aimed to spread democracy in the service of U.S. national interests; but it was the election in El Salvador which convinced Reagan of the power of democracy to repel communism. Other events in El Salvador, specifically the massacre at El Mozote and the extent to which the Reagan administration fully comprehended its allies’ crimes, receive little attention from McCormick.

George Shultz’s appointment as Secretary of State in July 1982 ushered in the third phase in U.S. policy. Shultz was a strong advocate for human rights in foreign policy; during his tenure, the administration became increasingly open regarding the dire human rights situation in El Salvador. The worsening politico-military situation in the region strengthened the Secretary of State’s commitment to elections and a political solution in general. In this third phase, regional developments, congressional pressure, and Shultz in particular encouraged the Reagan administration to consider democracy promotion more seriously, and to use it to justify foreign policy. This led to the fourth and final phase identified by McCormick, which roughly spanned 1984, and saw Reagan beginning to play a more active role in forging a bipartisan consensus for democracy promotion—“morally ... the only right thing to do” in foreign policy (103). “Reagan,” McCormick succinctly puts it, “had never sounded so Wilsonian” (104). The Sandinistas, the revolutionary government of Nicaragua who had ousted the Somoza family dictatorship, frustrated Shultz’s attempts to bring about a negotiated solution. In response, the Reagan administration portrayed the Sandinistas as outcasts from a “democratic trend in Central America” (106). Even Reagan’s opponent in the 1984 presidential election, Walter Mondale, committed himself to the human rights–centric rhetoric of U.S. support for Central American regimes. The Reagan administration had “recapture[d] the issue of human rights from its liberal critics” (109). Reagan’s 1985 inaugural invoked human rights as the core of the United States’ goal of democracy promotion; four years earlier his administration had been roundly criticized for disregarding human rights altogether.

U.S. policy towards Central America was not made in a vacuum. Though it is already lengthy at 50 pages, McCormick’s article would benefit from greater horizontal context, especially regarding the coincident changes underway in the Soviet Union. He is right to note that Central American policy presented the Kremlin with as many difficulties as it did the White House. Supporting communism in the region offered an opportunity to challenge Fidel Castro’s leadership, asserting Moscow’s position at the fore of the international communist movement. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership recognized that challenging the United States in the Western hemisphere entailed significant risks, and the Soviet military (and much of the Soviet Union’s economic output) was tied up in the Afghanistan conflict. But Leonid Brezhnev, whose namesake doctrine asserted Moscow’s right to intervene militarily to preserve the communist party’s monopoly on power, died partway through the period under discussion. Did Yuri Andropov’s and then Konstantin Chernenko’s accession to power change how the Reagan administration viewed international communism, especially in Central America? McCormick recognizes that U.S. policy-makers linked events in El Salvador with the rise of Solidarność and ensuring unrest in Poland, but the reader will find little guidance in thinking about the interplay between these two events in the Reagan administration’s thinking. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, Shultz’s push for a negotiated settlement to Central American problems reflected his broader views on the Cold War, particularly his key role in pushing for U.S.-Soviet rapprochement. Reagan, too, changed his outward approach to the Soviet Union; his speech on 16 January 1984 pledging to work to build a constructive working relationship between the superpowers goes unmentioned, as do the tentative steps which preceded it. This is a valuable and informative article, to be sure, but McCormick misses opportunities to leverage the full explanatory power of his research on Central America to help readers better understand US policy regarding the Cold War as a whole.

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This article is an important contribution to our understanding of the Reagan administration, which has too long been the province of pundits, as opposed to scholars. McCormick traces the creation of the Reagan Doctrine—which Reagan himself never invoked—from its jumbled roots in the administration’s early years to its coalescence, at least in the eyes of commentators at the time, at the beginning of Reagan’s second term in office. The “rhetorical trope of democracy promotion,” however, remained easy to manipulate (109). At once, it justified support for elections in El Salvador in 1982 and 1984 and justified the criminality of Iran-Contra as being in the interests of human rights. McCormick makes sense of a complex period in an article which should be valuable to those interested in the Reagan administration, Central America, and the history of U.S. foreign relations in general.

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