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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

The often tumultuous course of U.S.-Latin American relations during the 1950s and 1960s has generated a substantial scholarly literature. Contests over strategies of economic development, and the composition of the political and economic systems of Latin American countries, led to significant conflicts. The United States, and to a degree still debated, Cuba, frequently intervened on opposing sides of the social, political, and economic struggles of other countries. Unsurprisingly, historians have predominantly characterized the era as having been fraught—and having led to the socially destructive Dirty Wars of the 1970s. The United States, according to this prevailing view, prioritized anticommunism over democracy and contributed substantially to the era’s bloodshed.¹

Through a focused examination of U.S.-Venezuelan relations in Precarious Paths to Freedom, Aragorn Storm Miller offers a conditional challenge to this prevailing interpretation.² Significantly, he finds that U.S. policy emphasized the development of a sustainable democratic political system within Venezuela, and that U.S. officials worked in partnership with President Romulo Betancourt and his successor, Raúl Leoni, between the late 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, Miller contends that the U.S. policy toward Venezuela constituted the central example of U.S. efforts to foster moderate, democratic, and capitalist regimes in Latin America. As such, the U.S. relationship with Venezuela was one of the most important bilateral relationships in the hemisphere. Miller tells a story of high ideals, articulated by leaders in Washington and Caracas, implemented despite the efforts of radicals on the left and the right, from Venezuela and throughout the Caribbean region, to derail the democratic experiment. U.S. policymakers were, in this narrative, more committed to democracy promotion than is typically depicted in the broader historiography.

Miller also contends that the Venezuelan case has been under-examined in the extant literature. A populous and economically important country, Venezuela merits greater attention by historians of U.S.-Latin American relations. The country’s importance, he finds, is even more relevant in so far as the Betancourt government worked cooperatively with the United States to forge a moderate, democratic, capitalist center in the heart of an ideologically polarized region. Miller thus seeks to modify the predominant historiographical interpretation of the era. As Alejandro Velasco observes, “[i]t is a gutsy argument, especially as it challenges two major tenets of the last three decades of historiography on Cold War Latin America.” Ultimately, however, Velasco finds that Miller more effectively makes a case for Venezuelan relevance than he does for the significance of democracy promotion to U.S. foreign policy.

Indeed, the reviewers generally agree that Miller succeeds in restoring Venezuela’s experience to the center of our collective attention when exploring the dynamics of Latin America’s Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Venezuela was more than an outlier, and more than a U.S. proxy; its leaders made a substantial effort to nurture democratic norms throughout the hemisphere.


² Precarious Paths to Freedom was recently awarded the William M. LeoGrande Prize for Best Book on U.S.-Latin American Relations (2015-2016 period), from the American University Center for Latin American & Latino Studies.
The reviewers offer some additional praise for *Precarious Paths to Freedom*. Andrew Kirkendall characterizes it as “a good book on an important topic” that “deserves a close reading.” Stella Krepp concludes that the book constitutes a “rich study of a fundamentally important decade in Latin America that will help scholars to understand the complexity of Venezuelan domestic and foreign policies.” Robert Karl offers, on balance, the most positive review, finding that while Miller’s efforts to contextualize Venezuela’s experience in a multilateral, regional context ultimately fall short, the book nonetheless succeeds in demonstrating the potential of such a framework.

The reviewers also identify a number of shortcomings in Miller’s work. Significantly, they fault him for inadequately engaging with the existing literature on U.S.-Latin American relations generally, and U.S.-Venezuelan relations specifically. Velasco finds that “[f]or readers familiar with the long sweep of Cold War historiography, and of Venezuelan historiography in particular, Miller not so much offers a new argument than retreads an earlier one in which Venezuela figured prominently as a successful case in efforts to establish liberal democracy in the region.” Velasco goes on to argue that “Miller tends to reproduce and even deepen claims from that literature that … eventually collapsed in the 1990s and after.” In particular, he is critical of “a strong whiff of hagiography in Miller’s treatment of Betancourt.” Krepp agrees with Velasco that Miller relies on a narrow definition of democracy to substantiate his claim of Venezuelan exceptionalism.

Other reviewers criticize Miller’s engagement with the recent literature on Latin America’s Cold War. Krepp and Kirkendall in particular conclude that his engagement with the recent literature on U.S.-Latin American relations is lacking, and fault him for inadequately contextualizing the Venezuelan experience in that larger story. However, Karl is more positive in this regard, finding that while Miller did not fully succeed in contextualizing the Venezuelan story, he started that process.

Reviewers raise important questions about Miller’s representation of Venezuelan agency. The country’s archives are closed, and Miller has consequently been forced to rely largely on U.S. primary sources. Although he gained an additional perspective through Dominican records, the reviewers find that his ultimate treatment of Venezuelan actors is lacking; in Krepp’s words, Miller “fails to give Venezuelans a voice.” Dependence on official U.S. sources also opens to question some of Miller’s analysis of Cuban involvement in Venezuela. Velasco and Kirkendall point to his reliance on Central Intelligence Agency estimates when explaining the extent of Cuban intervention in Venezuela, and question the accuracy of the Agency’s data.

Finally, some of the reviewers argue, Miller could have analyzed Venezuela’s status as a major oil exporting country in significantly greater depth. The fact that Venezuela enjoyed a dominant position in global oil markets facilitated rates of economic growth far in excess of the country’s neighbors during times of high commodity prices. That fact could help explain how democratic leaders were able to stabilize themselves in power, at times of high commodity prices, despite unrest in the country and throughout the region.

Ultimately the reviewers harbor reservations about Miller’s emphasis on the importance of democracy to U.S. officials in the broader Latin American context, and of his claims to originality in making these arguments in the Venezuelan context specifically. They nonetheless find the book to be a useful addition to the expanding literature on U.S.-Latin American relations in the 1950s and 1960s. By questioning what have become long-standing characterizations of U.S. policy in the region, Miller forces scholars to sharpen their own analysis and explain the factors that caused the paths of different Latin American countries to diverge at particular times, and in particular instances.
Participants:

Aragorn Storm Miller is a lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin. He has written several articles, including “Season of Storms: The United States and the Caribbean Contest for a New Political Order, 1958-1961,” in Beyond the Eagle’s Shadow: New Histories of Latin America’s Cold War, (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2013), and “A Sword Cuts Two Ways: Cold War Policymaking in the OAS,” Portal 5 (2009-2010). Precarious Paths to Freedom was recently awarded the William M. LeoGrande Prize for Best Book on U.S.-Latin American Relations (2015-2016 period), from the American University Center for Latin American & Latino Studies.

Dustin Walcher is Associate Professor and Chair of History & Political Science at Southern Oregon University. A specialist in international history, U.S. foreign relations, and inter-American affairs, he is currently revising a manuscript that examines the link between the failure of U.S.-led economic initiatives and the rise of social revolution in Argentina during the 1950s and 1960s. He recently completed (with Jeffrey F. Taffet) a combined textbook and primary source document reader, The United States and Latin America: A History with Documents.

Andrew J. Kirkendall is Professor of history at Texas A&M University. His most recent book is Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy (University of North Carolina Press, 2010). He wrote an essay on the state of the field in Cold War Latin America studies that H-Diplo published in 2014, and he has a book chapter on teaching Cold War Latin American history in Understanding and Teaching the Cold War, edited by Matthew Masur, forthcoming from the University of Wisconsin Press. He is at work on a book on the Kennedy brothers, liberal Democrats, and Cold War Latin America.

Robert A. Karl is Assistant Professor of history at Princeton University, where he teaches modern Latin American history. His publications include “Reading the Cuban Revolution from Bogotá, 1957-62,” Cold War History (2016), and the forthcoming Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia (University of California Press, 2017).

Stella Krepp is Assistant Professor of Iberian and Latin American history at the University of Bern, Switzerland. She received her PhD in History from University of Cambridge in 2013 and is currently writing a book provisionally titled The Decline of the Western Hemisphere? Inter-American Relations from 1941 to 1990.

Alejandro Velasco is Associate Professor of Modern Latin America at the Gallatin School and at the Department of History of New York University. He is the author of Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela (University of California Press, 2015), and is the current Executive Editor of NACLA Report on the Americas. He holds a Ph.D. in History from Duke University.
Storm Miller’s *Precarious Paths to Freedom* signals that historiography on the Cold War in Latin America has entered a new cycle. The better part of a decade has passed since a round of provocative works on Latin American international history reached readers in the early 2010s. *Precarious Paths to Freedom* counts among the first books to reckon with the often contradictory claims that literature set forth about the role of the Right and Left in Latin America’s political violence, and about Latin American agency and the hemisphere’s place in global processes of political, ideological, and social contestation.

Miller’s introduction indeed surveys this historiographical landscape, and offers bold claims about the Venezuelan case. In the ten years following its 1958 post-authoritarian transition, Miller argues, “Venezuela was the critical arena for the hemispheric Cold War” (xii). Venezuela mattered not solely in and of itself, or because of its relationship to the United States. Instead, “Venezuela [served] as a hinge between the United States and its antagonists in the hemisphere and beyond” (xv).

This is a useful optic, which Miller applies to good effect over the book’s first two chapters. As he suggests, there are few studies of the mid-twentieth century that extend beyond Washington’s foreign policy with individual Latin American countries to consider the broader arena of inter-American relations (xvi). *Precarious Paths to Freedom* is most effective in its narration of Venezuela’s democratic opening and subsequent dealings with Cuba, whose revolution had yet to define its direction; and with the Dominican Republic, whose dictator bore a strident enmity towards Venezuela’s President Rómulo Betancourt. Indeed, I wish that *Precarious Paths to Freedom* had been available when I conducted my own research on hemispheric relations in the late 1950s and early 1960s.3

Even the limitations of Miller’s approach are sometimes instructive as we contemplate writing the history of intra-Latin American relations at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. Miller argues throughout *Precarious Paths to Freedom* that Venezuela was an exceptional case in Latin America. However, as a historian of Colombia, I was struck by how many times one could substitute Venezuela with Colombia, or Betancourt

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with President Alberto Lleras Camargo. From Miller’s statement that “Betancourt was transforming Venezuela into the progressive, democratic conscience of Latin America” (40), to his observation about Venezuela’s status as a “model participant in the Alliance for Progress” development programs (114), and as a proving ground for counter-insurgency aid (179, 193), substantial portions of this account felt familiar.

This is not simply a question of a useful comparative case next door to Venezuela. More significant is the fact that Venezuelans in the 1950s, including Betancourt himself, looked to Colombia and other recently post-authoritarian Latin American countries for models of how to (and more often of how not to) structure their partisan pacts and institutional arrangements. To be certain, tracking such transnational borrowing of ideas and political forms would be a sizeable undertaking. It may be that we are at least one additional historiographical cycle away from being able to construct multilateral or more synthetic histories of the inter-American system. Miller is to be commended for raising the challenge of placing the foreign relations of individual Latin American countries “into a truly regional context, [if not] a global one” (xvi). But Precarious Paths to Freedom falls short of that ambitious goal.

Miller’s lens becomes narrower in the second half of the book. Shifting away from regional affairs, the book follows closely the multitude of raids launched by Cuban-backed Venezuelan insurgents in the 1960s (an account that would have substantially benefited from the inclusion of a map of Venezuela). By scarcely covering the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic (135), Miller misses an opportunity to illuminate Venezuelan opinion about the state of Caribbean democracy, five years after the high point of anti-authoritarian struggles in the region. The multilateral dimension of the book’s early chapters falls away.

Miller faced an unenviable dilemma in researching Precarious Paths to Freedom, in that Venezuelan political archives from this period remain inaccessible (xiii-xiv). Here a hemispheric approach proved a methodological asset; research in Dominican archives allowed Miller to get around his limited source base. Of particular note later in the book is Miller’s use of Central Intelligence Agency reports. Yet I think Miller sometimes overstates what his sources convey. For example, Miller at one point outlines Cuba’s tools for coordinating with local insurgent forces: “a reliable system of couriers and smugglers,” “embedded instructions…in 170 weekly hours of Spanish-, Portuguese-, and Quecha [sic]-language [radio] broadcasts” (162). Left unsaid in the text is that these details are CIA estimates. The reality was likely something else entirely. Indeed, on the following page, Miller tells a story of Venezuelan guerrillas tuning in to Cuban radio. Rather than imparting coded instructions, the ruminations of the French revolutionary theorist Régis Debray provoked “mild chuckles” from the Venezuelans (163). Miller’s work reinforces that however much Havana played up the subjective nature of reconversion, the actual process was not so straightforward.

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4 Previously director general of the Pan-American Union (1947-1948), and the inaugural secretary director of its successor, the Organization of American States (1948-1954), Lleras led Colombia’s democratic transition in the mid-1950s, before being elected president for the 1958-1962 term.


factors which stood at the core of Che Guevara’s *foco* theory of revolution, Latin American *guerrillas* found themselves in the harsh objective conditions of Latin America’s backlands (145-147, 208).

*Precarious Path to Freedom*’s focus on insurgency and counter-insurgency—and on diplomatic and political matters more generally—raises larger questions of interpretation as well. Neither Venezuela’s petro-diplomacy nor its overall economic development receive significant attention. For instance, although *Precarious Paths to Freedom* covers the period of the organization’s founding in 1960, there is not a single mention of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). By contrast, trends in global oil prices, and their effects on Venezuela’s economy, receive coverage only in the book’s second half. But when Miller does raise them, they are of decisive importance. Rebounding oil prices after 1963 allowed Venezuela to reach “the Alliance for Progress target of 2 percent net economic growth over natural population increase”—a record that few other Latin American countries could match (127). By 1967, climbing oil revenues had yielded a twenty-two percent rise in per capita incomes since the fall of the dictatorship in 1958 (196, 220). Venezuela was exceptional indeed.

Or was it? Here, once more, hemispheric contexts complicate Miller’s case. Miller observes at one point that in 1963, Venezuela’s "economy lagged, as always" (94). His later statements on the oil sector belie this comment. If we were to look slightly farther back into Venezuelan history, we would see the ramifications of oil price volatility there as well. The fall of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958 was but the latest in a series of regime changes brought about in large part by falling prices for Latin American commodities.7 The turnaround in the Eisenhower administration’s neglectful Latin America policy, which Miller addresses in *Precarious Paths to Freedom*’s first chapter, marked a reactive response to what the U.S. journalist Tad Szulc memorably called “the twilight of the tyrants.”8

Recent historiography on U.S.-Latin American relations in the 1950s, including *Precarious Paths to Freedom*, has not taken such chains of causality into account.9 Framing protests like the infamous 1958 attack on Vice President Richard Nixon’s motorcade in Caracas as the product of anti-American sentiment (1-2) misses both the post-authoritarian contexts in which these episodes took place and the underlying mechanisms that helped to produce those contexts. “Washington had separated political questions from economic ones,” Miller writes of the 1950s, “and Latin American reformers responded by combining them” (13). By paying closer attention to political economy, historians of Latin America and U.S.-Latin American relations can steer away from reproducing historiographically that former perspective.

Current events underscore the extent to which the drama of Venezuelan politics is tied to oil prices. Miller is out at the front of a new historiographical cycle, but real-world politics have already altered how his book will be received. When Miller completed his Ph.D. in 2012, oil cost around $90 per barrel and Hugo Chávez still sat at the head of the self-proclaimed Bolivarian Revolution. Reading Miller’s book four years later—with oil

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7 Michael F. Jiménez, “‘Citizens of the Kingdom’: Toward a Social History of Radical Christianity in Latin America,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 34 (Fall 1988): 5-6.


prices at barely half their 2012 level, Venezuela’s economy in free fall, and the government of Chávez’s successor facing an unprecedented political crisis—highlights the precariousness of Venezuela’s political paths, whatever they may be. I wish that Miller had ended this book with stronger allusions to how the end of his story gets us to Chávez; the final pages only hint at what would turn out to be a fatal legitimacy crisis for the post-1958 political system (220). Miller has nonetheless given us a detailed and at times suggestive study of a country that once was—as it is again today—a focal point of global attention toward Latin America.
This is a good book on an important topic. Aragorn Storm Miller is certainly correct in arguing that the United States, as well as Cuba, thought that much was at stake in Venezuela from 1958 to 1968. A country with vast petroleum resources, Venezuela received strong support from the United States, as well as unwanted attention from Cuba’s leader Fidel Castro, who viewed Rómulo Betancourt, the country’s President in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a rival for influence in the Caribbean as the Venezuelan sought to create a reformist government in a country with virtually no history of democracy.

I cannot agree, however, that Miller makes his case that it was the most significant nation in Latin America during this time period even as far as the United States was concerned. To make that case would have required a broader regional perspective and a deeper engagement with the literature. The countries which received the most Alliance for Progress aid (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic) would seem to be at least as important, if not more so, than Venezuela (and, as happens too frequently, Miller does not cite an indispensable book, in this case the major work on the Alliance by Jeffrey Taffet). ¹

More primary research was necessary as well. He bases his arguments primarily on sources from the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries. Research in Venezuela itself evidently did not yield much. For the South American side of the story he uses newspapers, pamphlets, and memoirs, particularly as they relate to the factionalism on the left that undermined the insurgencies which Castro supported and which sought to create a revolutionary rather than a reformist government.

The book gets off to a rather rocky start. Miller argues against conventional wisdom regarding the Eisenhower administration’s lack of interest in the region and its socioeconomic development, but he has not done sufficient research in the Eisenhower library. For a large part of his argument he primarily relies upon one source: a Milton Eisenhower oral history from 1967.² This source seems to have reinforced Miller’s suspicion that Latin America itself was to blame for its neglect in the 1950s and that the United States had tried, but had not gotten any help from the countries themselves. Moreover, there is a contradiction in his argument. He suggests that Eisenhower’s policy never was either as it was perceived or as it has been portrayed to have been, but then he argues that it really only changed in 1958 or perhaps in 1960.

For the sake of narrative simplicity, Miller then focuses on the Caribbean right’s response to the rise of the Rómulo Betancourt government and the attempts by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo to overthrow and even assassinate President Betancourt, which instead led to the diplomatic isolation of Trujillo himself. This is one of the stronger parts of the book in which the author makes good use of material from the Dominican Republic. Miller might have made more of the fact that members of the U.S. right generally, including portions of the American public, continued to admire the deposed dictator, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, and were deeply suspicious of Betancourt. Unfortunately, the evolution of the conflict between Castro and Betancourt,


² Miller, Precarious Paths to Freedom, 225-226, footnotes no. 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 11.
who had briefly seen themselves as kindred spirits after defeating their nation’s strongmen, is less developed here.

Miller certainly needed to deepen the book’s comparative regional analytical framework in order to explain why Venezuela was an exception to the rule. His introduction seems to suggest that other countries could have developed economically and politically as it did, but his conclusion seems to argue quite the opposite. He should have done more to explain why Venezuela came to be considered for many years an “exceptional democracy” by U.S. leaders and to engage with the literature on the subject. He barely mentions Betancourt’s early experience as a political leader from 1945 to 1948 during a brief democratic experiment. Many scholars neglect this period, but it is impossible to explain Betancourt’s reluctance to initiate sufficient reforms in the late 1950s and early 1960s without examining this period more closely.

The ability of Venezuela to forge a democracy when other countries with long histories of constitutional government were descending into dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s deserves more analysis, particularly since Venezuela accomplished this in spite of the fact that it was being challenged by what was, for some time, at least, a fairly successful insurgency. This is noteworthy, not least of all, because historians have been inclined to draw a direct line between enhanced military aid/counter-insurgency training and the establishment of the notoriously brutal military dictatorships during this era. In fact, many of the Latin American countries that experienced military dictatorships did not have significant insurgencies or, in some cases, their insurgencies developed in response to military dictatorship and not the other way around. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations also sought without success to prevent military coups in many countries (Peru in 1962, Honduras in 1963, and Argentina in 1966, to cite three examples), but Venezuela, besieged as it was, still held three free, competitive elections, culminating in the victory of an opposition party candidate at the end of 1968. It is striking also that popular turnout (95 percent) at the polls in 1963, for example, suggests a greater faith in formal democracy than in the particular political parties themselves (102). How this democratic consensus developed remains a bit of a mystery. Was Venezuelan society changing? Was a middle class developing? Miller does not say.

There is a surprising lack of engagement with important literature. A book on the evolution of civilian control over the armed forces, for example, would have helped the author better explain why Venezuelan democracy survived this troubled period. Nor does he engage the literature on counter-insurgency sufficiently. He argues convincingly that U.S. counter-insurgency training made a difference at the end (if not as much of a

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difference as the left’s tendency to fragment). It is not clear why he does not cite Henry Butterfield Ryan’s book on the success of U.S. counter-insurgency policy in Bolivia at the same time.5

The author spends a great deal of time describing the ideological twists and turns on the left. This part of the story is quite familiar. Like many others inspired by the vision of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, and what is frequently called the “foco theory,” or revolution by way of guerrilla warfare, the guerrillas believed that they could create revolutionary conditions where they did not exist. But one hardly needs convincing that the armed left failed to a large degree because of its own internal weaknesses.6

Undoubtedly, we need to know more about Cuba’s role here, and we presumably will in the future. Since we do not currently know more, however, it is important to be circumspect in our choice of words to describe it. Can we really be confident that Cuba directed the insurgency, as opposed to inspiring, training, and (seemingly) arming it? Stephen Rabe has frequently expressed skepticism regarding the discovery of Cuban arms in Venezuela in late 1963.7 The Central Intelligence Agency itself noted in August of 1963 that Castro did not send Cuban weapons to foreign countries. And one ought to remember that the planting of Cuban arms in a Latin American country had been contemplated as part of Operation Mongoose, after all. In any case, a book about Cuban policy should include reference to Paul Dosal’s stimulating book on Che.8 Miller certainly is right to argue that Castro undermined his claim of independence and influence by supporting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Miller also suggests that the Soviet Union, by this point, had tired of Cuban regional adventurism (131, 148-149, 161, and 184).

I would have liked to have read more on the relationship between oil prices and social and political developments because, in the end, he demonstrates that it was the increasing prosperity between 1963 and 1968 that was the primary reason that the political system was able to hang on.


6 In the most important book on this subject, Paul J. Dosal rejects the idea that Guevara really developed a new theory of guerrilla warfare. See Comandante Che: Guerrilla Soldier, Commander, and Strategist, 1956-1967 (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 20, 172, and 188-191.

7 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, 1999). Rabe expresses skepticism regarding the Cuban arms on 107 while he is more straightforwardly dismissive on 137.

The gradual decline of the political model Betancourt created (as oil prices fell in the 1980s) led many to question it, particularly after the crushing of a mass uprising in response to austerity policies in 1989. The failure of this “exceptional democracy” was the major factor, of course, in the rise of the authoritarian populist Hugo Chávez, who was elected when the price of petroleum reached its nadir. Miller does not discuss the emerging literature that examines the limitations of Betancourt’s vision of democracy, not least of all his treatment of the urban poor.⁹

This book deserves a close reading, for it certainly makes a contribution to our understanding of why U.S.-Latin American relations mattered so much in the 1960s. And it is a pleasure to read. But the book could have made an even more significant contribution than it does with a deeper grounding in primary and secondary sources.

“[O]nly diplomatic historians could reduce the Latin American Cold War to a Cuban beach” Greg Grandin lamented in 2007 and urged historians to counter the ‘crisis-driven narrative’ of U.S.-Latin American relations, which depicted the history of the region as a succession of wars and conflicts, yet failed to examine peaceful periods and long-term processes. Since then, outstanding new studies on inter-American relations redefining the Latin American Cold War have been published, yet Venezuela has until now escaped the attention of historians.

Aragorn Storm Miller’s *Precarious Paths to Freedom* delivers a timely response to these calls. Miller traces Venezuelan history in what he refers to as an outstanding democratic decade from 1958 to 1968. Examining the relationship between the United States and Venezuela, he argues for an “apparent case of Venezuelan exceptionalism in the otherwise gloomy story of the Cold War” (218), arguing that the presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt, Raúl Leoni, and Rafael Caldera and their *Punto Fijo* coalition were a triumph of democracy, aided and bolstered by the United States. Yet Miller also provides a detailed story of the internal upheavals of Venezuela. In rich detail, he recounts how Betancourt and later Leoni outmaneuvered the armed left in Venezuela, thwarted attempts by the Dominican President Rafael Trujillo and the Cuban leader Fidel Castro to intervene, and successfully consolidated Venezuelan democracy.

Miller’s central argument, however, is that the “Caracas-Washington axis would be the key force for moderate democratic capitalism” (34) in the region and a linchpin of U.S. Caribbean policy, particularly in regards to the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Miller offers his most compelling story when recounting the entangled history of Cuba, Venezuela, and the greater Caribbean for which the historian Stephen Rabe coined the term “Caribbean triangle.” Venezuela was central in condemning both the Dominican Republic and Cuba in the Organization of American States (OAS) and a strategic partner in dealing with threats to political stability in the Caribbean. Although the Eisenhower administration had originally supported Trujillo, by 1959 he had become a political liability. With his mercurial personality and constant meddling in the political affairs of his country’s neighbors, he threatened to become a destabilizing force in the Caribbean. In turn, he positioned himself in direct opposition to moderate democratic leaders in the region, particularly Venezuela’s President Rómulo Betancourt. Trujillo’s personal vendetta against Betancourt reached its climax in 1960, when it transpired that Trujillo had not only mounted a political campaign against Betancourt, but was implicated in an assassination attempt that left Betancourt severely injured. The Venezuelan government requested an investigation of the affair by the Organization of American States, which promptly condemned Trujillo for...

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violating inter-American rules. By August 26 of that year, the United States and all Latin American countries had severed diplomatic ties with the Dominican Republic.

Miller chronicles how Venezuela also cooperated with the United States in countering Castro and his support of armed struggle in the region. Betancourt was the central figure in rallying support for the exclusion of the Castro regime from the OAS in 1962 and in demanding further sanctions. In late 1963, after discovering an arms cache of Cuban provenance on Venezuelan ground, the Betancourt government approached the OAS again, charging that Cuba had aided and financed revolutionary groups in Venezuela. After a report that substantiated the charges that Cuba had sponsored actions to overthrow the Venezuelan government, the OAS imposed economic and political sanctions in July 1964.

One of the most fascinating accounts that Miller offers is the story of the short-lived rapprochement between Trujillo and Castro in late 1960 and early 1961 that U.S. officials stylized as a “Hitler-Stalin type of cooperation” (60). Since the Cuban relationship with the U.S. was souring, it underscored the oftentimes pragmatic politics of many Latin American governments that defied Cold War imperatives.

Despite such praise, I do have some criticism and quibbles. As mentioned in the book’s introduction, the author was unable to gain access to Venezuelan archives. He consequently bases his study on U.S. documents, and, to a lesser extent, on Dominican sources, as well as Venezuelan periodicals and a small selection of edited interviews and public statements. This is unfortunate, because the over-reliance on U.S. sources shows in the overall analysis. Despite Miller’s best intentions to reinstate Latin American agency, by not using Venezuelan sources he ultimately fails to give Venezuelans a voice. In practical terms, this means there is little in-depth discussion of what the Venezuelans wanted and how that differed from or approximated U.S. wishes. Just because superficial political interests in the Caribbean often aligned does not necessarily mean that the underlying motives also coincided.

This is perhaps most acute in Miller’s claims of Cuban and Soviet involvement in Venezuela. Yet, apart from showing that there were links, it remains unclear to what extent and in what ways Castro’s Cuba supported violent struggles in Venezuela. This is important because the question of impact and causality is crucial for establishing agency. In sum, did Cuban involvement constitute an actual threat or did the Betancourt government exaggerate the Cuban involvement for its own purposes? Miller hints at this in his introduction when he explains that “Venezuelan moderates…dexterously exploited US support” (xi) but his book ultimately cannot adequately address this point with the available evidence.

The study would also have benefitted from a broader Latin American contextualization, particularly to underline the author’s argument of Venezuelan exceptionalism. Many of the issues Venezuela faced—the radicalization of politics, the rise of the armed left, the question of development and democracy—were region-wide phenomena and a comparative perspective would have helped Miller to carve out why and how the Venezuelan path diverged. Without wanting to fall into the trap of suggesting a different book than the author has written, neighboring Colombia might have been an illuminating example as it experienced similar obstacles, but ultimately followed a distinct path.

Miller’s main theme is the “U.S.-Venezuelan effort to simultaneously consolidate democracy and modernization” (217). While he acknowledges that Washington soon privileged political stability over democracy in the rest of the hemisphere, he argues that Washington’s commitment to Venezuelan democracy
did not waver. However, I am not entirely convinced that democracy was such a crucial factor in U.S.-Venezuelan relation for several reasons.

First, Miller portrays Betancourt as a “leading visionary of Latin American societal reform and democratization” (14), but here he advances a fairly narrow interpretation of what constitutes democracy. Miller’s assessment of the Punto Fijo coalition as the first Venezuelan democratic government seems somewhat surprising. Skimming over the democratic trienio period from 1945 to 1948, in what Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough have defined as a first wave of democratization in Latin America, it is maybe not as much of a rupture as Miller would like us to believe.4 Even though for Venezuelans the transition towards democracy was certainly a transformative experience, it is important to note that this was a limited democracy with restricted democratic competition. And whether justified or not, Betancourt suspended the constitution, outlawed political parties and did not hesitate to use police and the armed forces to repress the radical left. Pledging democratic values and staging free elections are not the same as democratic rule, as the case of the current Venezuelan government painfully demonstrates.

Second, there has been a long-standing dispute over whether or not there was a genuine effort in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to further democracy in the region. Scholars such as Thomas Field Jr. have argued that the John F. Kennedy government and its ‘Alliance for Progress’ fueled authoritarianism and ultimately laid the foundation for military dictatorship in Bolivia.5 Others, such as Philip E. Muehlenbeck and Robert B. Rakove, have forwarded a more nuanced critique claiming that the Kennedy administration sought to nurture nationalist, anti-communist regimes with democratic tendencies in the Third World.6 Yet the key word here seems to be anti-Communist. As Stephen Rabe has convincingly argued, for Washington democracy came a distant second to anticommunism in its search for strategic partners within the hemisphere.7 Overall, more engagement with the literature and the new Latin American Cold War history, such as Tanya Harmer’s work, would have strengthened and helped situate Miller’s arguments.8

As a case in point, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ actions towards other democratic governments in the region speak a very different language. In Brazil, Alliance funds were channeled to the state governors directly, in an attempt to destabilize the Goulart government, because Washington accused him of left-leaning tendencies and being soft on Communists. Maybe more importantly, Brazilian Presidents Jânio

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8 Tanya Harmer, Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
Quadros and João Goulart adopted a more independent foreign policy, something quite unpalatable to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Ultimately, perhaps Venezuela was not more democratic than other governments in say Brazil or Chile, but Betancourt and his successors were undoubtedly more manageable than other democratic leaders in Latin America.

In a similar vein, Miller casts the Venezuelan inter-American policies against both Trujillo and Castro as a triumph of democratic values. However, Latin American support for the OAS sanctions against Trujillo and later Castro were less about the nature of their governments and more about their sponsoring of subversion and interference in neighboring countries, a violation of the sacrosanct non-intervention rule. One wonders if that was the reason for the Venezuela government as well. Ultimately, would Betancourt have moved against Castro if he had not supported the armed left in Venezuela? The answer is probably not.

Despite these drawbacks, this is rich study of a fundamentally important decade in Latin America that will help scholars to understand the complexity of Venezuelan domestic and foreign politics. With his study, Miller underscores the importance of the multilateral dimension of U.S.-Latin American relations that is often so difficult to engage with.
You cannot judge a book by its cover, but a good cover can tell you a lot about a book. That is the case with Aragorn Miller’s ambitious new Precarious Paths to Freedom, which greets readers with a photo from President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 visit to Venezuela. In the background, a distant Kennedy speaks on stage, dwarfed by a giant banner overhead trumpeting “Bienvenidos” (Welcome) between a large, stern likeness of Venezuela’s President Romulo Betancourt on one end, and a smaller, pensive Kennedy on the other. In the foreground, an outsized, anonymous soldier and his rifle look on as a security cordon separates the stage from a crowd that remains off camera and out of sight.

It is a fitting image for the book, in ways complimentary and less so. Miller’s aim is to shed light on the tense interplay between three actors on the cover, and what they embody—elected officials (democratic moderation), soldiers (violent conflict), and the public (popular support)—at a critical moment in inter-American diplomacy. The decade between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, argues Miller, marked an interregnum of sorts in Cold War history, a period when the U.S. undertook serious efforts to move past its reliance on strongman dictators in Latin America and instead embrace a new generation of liberal democrats struggling to modernize the region’s politics and economy in ways that were more inclusive and representative. During this period of geopolitical realignment, Latin American liberals were far more equal partners than subordinates to the U.S. In turn, U.S. officials proved far more ideologically open in their approach to the region. Little was foretold as this experiment to consolidate a liberal democratic alliance unfolded. What was certain, however, was that a ‘welcome’ new age of democratic cooperation had begun, well heralded by the banner on the cover image.

What is more, according to Miller, this experiment proved a success. Or at least it did in one place: Venezuela. As Betancourt’s large, central presence relative to Kennedy’s smaller, distant one on the cover illustrates, Venezuelan elected officials—following the 1958 overthrow of U.S. backed dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez—pushed the U.S., often outpacing it in fact, to support democracy in the region, not as a matter of expediency but from enlightened self-interest. To be sure, they looked to the U.S. for guidance and support, but more often than not the U.S. followed rather than drove hemispheric policy. Meanwhile, Venezuelan liberals and their U.S. partners fought with increasing violence and sophistication against extremists from both right (led by erstwhile U.S. ally Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic) and left (inspired and funded by Cuba’s revolutionary government), struggling all the while to preserve core values of pluralism and respect for the rule of law. In the back and forth between violence and moderation—between the cover’s background and foreground—the latter proved victorious, and liberal democracy won the backing of the public without sacrificing its principles.

It is a gutsy argument, especially as it challenges two major tenets of the last three decades of historiography on Cold War era Latin America. One views Venezuela as a bit player in a regional conflagration pitting Cuba and the United States in starring roles, with other countries like Mexico and the Soviet Union figuring as ‘hinges’ for their ability at times to influence outcomes different from the designs of the major actors.1

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1 For example, Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Gilbert Joseph and Greg Grandin, eds., A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence in Latin America’s Long Cold War (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
Venezuela, if it enters the literature at all, does so as an exceptional outlier at best or at worst, as a U.S. proxy, either way, it is portrayed as being scarcely relevant in the region. The other key claim of Cold War historiography, instead perhaps its major claim and related to the first, is that surface and episodic efforts aside (Alliance for Progress, Peace Corps, U.S. Agency for International Development), U.S. approaches to Latin America between the 1950s and 1980s were defined by state policy committed to thwarting Communism by any means necessary, all claims of democracy promotion aside. If democracy thrived anywhere in Latin America, it was despite, not because of, U.S. interests in the region.

Miller is most convincing in tackling the first claim. “Venezuela was for a decade the heart of the Latin American Cold War,” he writes, “and in the 1960s Washington devoted great resources to fight an array of extremists for control of this heart” (218). Drawing largely on U.S. newspapers accounts, CIA and State Department records, and documents from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson libraries, Miller provides ample evidence of just how much Venezuela remained a “hemispheric trump card [that] put several powerful constituencies on a collision course” (95) in the decade following the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez. First, Trujillo early on recognized in Pérez Jiménez’s ouster a looming challenge to the status quo in which stability and economic growth—especially against communist threats—trumped democracy. Betancourt’s election at the end of 1958 gave Trujillo a target, and a prize, which he sought to win through various means, from the floor of the Organization of American States to assassination attempts in Caracas. But Betancourt proved a formidable match not just by surviving attempts on his life and consolidating diplomatic support, but ideologically as well, helping to craft what Miller calls a ‘doctrine’ holding that social peace, economic growth, and political democratization were not just mutually constitutive, but in fact rested on the latter in order to bring about former. Argues Miller: “This fusion in the Latin American mind of economics and politics meant that Washington needed to identify and support the leading democratic reformers in the hemisphere” (17).

Trujillo’s assassination and the collapse of the Dominican dictatorship provided Betancourt major vindication, but Venezuela soon became a prize for a different regional foe: Cuba. Like Trujillo, Cuba’s President Fidel Castro also saw in Venezuela a tipping point for the region—and indeed, Miller sees both Castro and Trujillo as sides of the same coin of “interventionist despots” (225). But where the authoritarian Trujillo sough to preserve the status quo ante, the revolutionary Castro aimed to break with all prior models, especially the neo-imperialist ones re-emerging in a Venezuela that was subordinated to the U.S. As Miller writes, “Because of the ability of Venezuelan moderates to blunt the rightist attack, establish themselves as a force in the OAS, and support U.S. interests, by the summer of 1961 the Caracas-Washington axis would be the key force for moderate democratic capitalism as new threats from the left wing arose” (34).

Hence Venezuela became the sword on which the fortunes of hemispheric Communism would fall against “moderate democratic capitalism,” as Castro’s material, discursive, and ideological support for a flagging armed insurgency through the mid-1960s and even after “moderate communist renunciation of violence” (164) in the late 1960s well showed. All the while, the U.S. pumped attention and massive resources into Venezuela to the tune of U.S. $3 billion in capital investments by 1963 (114), by consistently locating Venezuela as a top strategic priority worldwide on par with southeast Asia (74), and in working alongside the

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Venezuelan military to test new counterinsurgency methods that combined special tactics (144) and political indoctrination (80). By 1969, the peaceful transfer of power to an opposition party following successful elections dealt a final blow to the armed insurgency and, according to Miller, signaled the victory of freedom over despotism in Latin America.

In Miller’s account, then, Venezuela convincingly reemerges as a key site and agent of Cold War era struggles in Latin America. And to be sure, it is a reemergence. For readers familiar with the long sweep of Cold War historiography, and of Venezuelan historiography in particular, Miller not so much offers a new argument than retreats an earlier one in which Venezuela figured prominently as a successful case in efforts to establish liberal democracy in the region. In the 1970s and 1980s, as much of Latin America descended into civil war or U.S. backed dictatorships, Venezuela became for scholars an exceptional if indeed, in Miller’s words, precarious “island of democratic stability in a turbulent hemispheric and global environment” (214), an island to be admired and if possible, emulated.

Explanations varied. Daniel Levine pointed, tentatively, to the dexterity of political leaders in navigating extremist pressures from students, labor, and capital in the 1960s. Robert Alexander’s biography of Rómulo Betancourt held aloft the democratic vocation, especially, of Venezuela’s first elected President after 1958 and more broadly, of the generation of politicians he led in building a seemingly durable liberal order. Steve Ellner emphasized the maturity of the left in abandoning armed struggle and helping to configure a truly pluralist political system. Other works by Lisa Peattie, John Martz and David Myers, Judith Ewell, and John Lombardi considered Venezuelan democracy’s commitment to developmentalism, the strength of its institutions, its skillful harnessing of the oil industry, and an historic impetus for modernity, respectively. Together, these and many others made up a body of work that for decades held up Venezuela, in terms similar to Miller’s, as a beacon of liberty, democracy, and progress in the region.

All of which makes their omission in the book, at best, puzzling, partly given what Miller claims is a paucity of source material, but more so because Miller tends to reproduce and even deepen claims from that literature that along with the once vaunted two-party Punto Fijo system, eventually collapsed in the 1990s and after. There is, for instance, a strong whiff of hagiography in Miller’s treatment of Betancourt that even Alexander’s

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sympathetic appraisal sidesteps, understanding him to be a calculating, even ruthless figure when necessary–more the stern likeness of Miller’s cover than the principled, moderate democrat of Miller’s narrative: excluding Communists from the Pact of Punto Fijo long before Castro entered the scene, stoking generational splits in Acción Democrática (AD) in order to assert his supremacy over the party, suspending civil liberties while in office not just as a last resort but a show of force, diverting resources from Caracas and other major urban centers and in the process failing to gain the support of the capital city, which spurned him and AD throughout the very decade of democratic consolidation.

These are not just incidental features of Betancourt’s political life, as they appear in Miller’s narrative–when they appear. As even period literature showed–notably Frank Bonilla and Jose Silva Michelena’s 1971 multi-volume MIT study *The Politics of Change in Venezuela* – and as later studies by Michael Coppedge, Jennifer McCoy, and Daniel Hellinger among others confirmed in the 1990s, the very qualities of statesmanship Miller exalts in Betancourt and peers, and of moderation in *puntofijismo*’s institutional design, qualities that appeared as strength in the 1960s, became major weaknesses as Venezuelan democracy entered crisis in the 1980s. Ignoring this literature leads Miller to shaky conclusions: “In early 1969,” he writes, “the United States and Venezuela had just achieved a major victory in stamping out right-wing and left-wing extremism and intervention, yet in some ways [President Richard] Nixon and [President Rafael Caldera] seemed to be delivering eulogies for failed foreign and domestic policies” (214). Some historiographical engagement might have nuanced Miller’s assessment of Caldera’s hesitation, understanding it not as capitulation or misreading, but rather the opposite: as a sober assessment of the costs that achieving ‘major victory’ had incurred for a durable democratic project.

But the issue is less about interpretation than about conceptualization. Miller’s book repeats a key shortcoming of the early so-called ‘exceptionalist’ literature on Venezuela: Miller defines democracy narrowly, as being limited largely to elections. Of Caldera’s 1969 victory, he writes: “Washington had succeeded in assisting the pivotal Latin American nation in finally defeating leftist extremism and consolidating democracy through a third consecutive peaceful and open election” (209). But equating peaceful and open elections, even the handover of power to an opposition party, with democratic consolidation is to set aside grave problems in the conduct of democracy, problems Caldera keenly understood and that his Christian Democrats attempted, unsuccessfully, to address as early as 1973 with plans to make Venezuelan democracy less tutelary and top down than had been the case in the 1960s.

Here, too, the cover is instructive. Much of Miller’s argument about Venezuela’s democratic success relies on how the public responded to battles between moderates and radicals. “But in the country most targeted by the forces of hemispheric extremism throughout the previous decade,” he writes, “democracy had thrived and the country was well into an era of unprecedented prosperity at the national and per capita level” (210). Yet evidence of democracy’s thriving is limited to public support expressed by way of ballots, much as the audience on the cover remains out of view, their take on events on stage largely assumed rather than independently explored. In fact much tension underlay *puntofijismo*’s electoral support, as Levine early on argued in his deep take on the student and labor movements, and as did others like Talton Ray, whose 1969 *The Politics of the Barrios of Venezuela* offered an on-the-ground, measured assessment of why popular sectors embraced electoral politics and rejected armed revolution, seeing both as flawed options. Insofar as the former won out, it did so gravely wounded, with structural shortcomings that would grow worse in the years and decades ahead.
High among these shortcomings, of course, was *puntofijismo*’s dependency on oil revenues to provide the economic cushion in the late 1960s that Miller presents rather as a side note to the public’s acceptance of electoral democracy over armed revolution (197). In fact, oil-derived prosperity in the late 1960s was not unprecedented; it had taken place under Pérez Jiménez, too, as voters in Caracas especially keenly understood when they granted the former dictator major electoral support in 1968 when he sought a return to political life in Venezuela, before being legally barred from going forward. It was the economic turnaround provided by rising oil prices at the end of the decade, coupled with tactical and strategic errors by the armed left that Miller competently recounts (though again, long since well documented in both older and more recent literature10), that helped *puntofijismo* outpace a revolutionary left option. Much as it underwrote liberal democracy’s victory, masking deep structural flaws in the process, oil would likewise expose those flaws as fatal just two decades later.

Omitting key historiography undercuts Miller’s conclusions on the depth, strength, and causes of Venezuela’s democratic success. It also weakens Miller’s second, even more ambitious intervention: “The tragedies in US-Latin American relations before 1958 and after 1968,” he argues, “though important and worthy of study, should not obscure the significance of US-Venezuelan success in the ten years in which the political orientation of the hemisphere could have undergone a fundamental transformation” (215). Miller is partially correct: hemispheric politics might have taken a different path. They did not of course, and not after 1968, but long prior. As Miller acknowledges, João Goulart’s 1964 overthrow in Brazil severely undermined the democracy promotion discourse and practice, as the U.S. and Venezuela squarely supported the coup. U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 (which barely appears), continuing support for Central American military dictatorships throughout the 1960s, increasingly violent counterinsurgency training and indoctrination via the School of the Americas: these are through threads of U.S.-Latin American relations in the 1960s, not marginal or incidental. They inform a generation or more of historiography that Miller argues has too bluntly cast U.S. policy in the region as omnipotently, unilaterally, and unproblematically committed to thwarting anti-Communism by any means necessary.

To be sure, the U.S. as brutal lord over its Latin American backyard either directly or by way of puppets acting against the interests of the region’s downtrodden is a strong trope especially in the early historiography. But even earlier works like those of Walter LaFeber11 and Lars Schoultz12 offer a far less uniform and hierarchical account of U.S. policy and practice, and of Latin American agency, than Miller allows. And some

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of the authors Miller does engage like Piero Gleijeses\textsuperscript{13} and Greg Grandin\textsuperscript{14} present a reading of the U.S. and of Latin America (in this case, Guatemala) in the Cold War marked as much by internal and external pressures informing and modifying each, some of them long preceding the Cold War, than by grand theory.

And yet it is Miller who asserts that “although the Latin American Cold War continued into the 1970s and 1980s, its outcome had been decided during 1958-1968” (xix). It is unclear what “outcome” means here—a ‘successful’ one in the case of Venezuela, or one bathed in blood and intervention, as the historiography has well established. If the latter, then it is difficult to call the previous decade’s efforts anything other than a failure, or at the very least, insofar as they were successful in implementing a very narrow electoral democracy in Venezuela, dependent on oil’s whims— not institutional solidarity or liberal virtue—for social peace, rather limited and perhaps even exceptional, a finite success won at the cost of eventual defeat. Against this backdrop, Cold-War era historiography has not so much obscured the significance of U.S.-Venezuelan success as much as Miller dramatically overstates it.

Once more, the book’s cover offers clues. The relative positioning between soldiers and stage is important, for while Miller places the focus on the background politicians, arguing that their statesmanship, moderation, and liberal vocation helped save Venezuela as an island of democracy and ‘freedom,’ what again and again emerges is the foreground, the violent struggle to bring that democracy about. The background may have won, but it was the iron fist of the foreground that made it so. If democracy thrived in Venezuela—and both the literature and subsequent history has cast major doubts on that claim—the political moderation and liberal vocation of Betancourt and especially his successor, Raúl Leoni, were far from primary factors.

Ultimately, what Miller actually presents is a history comprised less of precarious than of contradictory paths, ones that led less to freedom than to a very particular form of democracy, premised on tenuous stability. In this sense, whatever Venezuela may show about the supposed contradictions in U.S. policy, it is rather the exception that proves the rule: that democracy, and its promotion by the U.S., would remain circumscribed to the interests of anti-Communism, no matter the cost to the ideals of self-determination, pluralism, and moderation.


\textsuperscript{14} Greg Grandin, \textit{The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
I wish to thank Thomas R. Maddux and H-Diplo for coordinating this round table, and Robert A. Karl, Andrew Kirkendall, Stella Krepp, and Andrew Velasco for their time and keen insight in reviewing and critiquing my first monograph. I have learned much and wrestled with many problems in the researching and writing of this book, and I certainly have contended with many compelling issues in considering the thoughts of the reviewers. It seems to me that the reviewers’ criticisms fall into three main categories: the overall scope of the inquiry; the validity of the arguments asserted; and the inquiry’s position within the extant historiography. I generally regard these criticisms as having some merit, though I do not feel as though the weaknesses identified overshadow the overall contribution I sought to make with the book. Indeed, from the outset of this project, a slight shadow of doubt dogged me, but it also seemed to me that I had uncovered an important but largely unexplored chapter in U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War, and that it needed to be brought to light and subjected to greater scrutiny, whatever my own limitations as a scholar. I am happy to see such scrutiny applied at the very end of the process, and to see that the reviewers find the monograph to be useful in advancing the historiography to some degree.

All four reviewers registered their concern that the focus on political and economic developments within Venezuela obscured other important regional events and trends. Particularly striking to me is Karl and Krepp’s feeling that Colombia merited greater attention, and that all four scholars feel as though the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic was essentially ignored in my work and that the 1964 military coup in Brazil received only passing attention. In fact, throughout my research I continued to encounter situations where events in other nations intersected with events within Venezuela. This was especially the case with Colombia. I noticed some of the same concerns over social and economic modernization, and there appeared to be similar glimmerings of the issues of leftist insurgency—with or without international support—and counterinsurgency cooperation between the local government and the United States. Also, it was clear to me that the democratizing governments of Venezuela and Colombia were attempting to work together and learn from each other in managing mutual problems. In this respect, Karl’s assertion that Venezuela’s President Romulo Betancourt was learning as much from other Latin American democrats as he was teaching them struck me as especially compelling. With regard to issues like the Dominican intervention and the authoritarian coup in Brazil, I again found these issues exerting a degree of influence on U.S.-Venezuelan-Cuban relations at key points in the mid-1960s, both for the governments and for the growing leftist insurgency in Venezuela, whose leaders watched these situations for clues as to political developments in the future.

Suffice it to say that the question of how wide or narrow I should set the scope of my research was a bedeviling one. This book originally began as an inquiry into the aftermath of the 1964 Brazilian coup from the perspective of the Lyndon Johnson administration, but this effort was thwarted by my inability to form a clear research question and my limited mastery of Portuguese. In studying U.S.-Latin American relations in 1964, however, I ran across the issue of Organization of American States (OAS) sanctions against Cuba for its alleged smuggling (as Kirkendall notes) of weapons to the insurgency in Venezuela. The original book manuscript in fact contained nearly a chapter’s worth of work on Brazil in 1964 preserved from earlier research, but I cut this out in the interest of space. I had also done some preliminary research into the Dominican intervention, but felt that engaging too closely with Dominican politics after the 1961 assassination of longtime dictator and strongman Rafael Trujillo would have significantly altered the direction of the project and risked consuming the eventual manuscript. This concern also governed my thoughts concerning nations like Colombia and Mexico (of which I was made aware by my old graduate school
colleague Renata Keller, who is currently doing important work on that nation’s role in the Latin American Cold War). Overall, then, I was faced with a number of very difficult choices as to what leads to follow, and what actors and issues to include and omit. I did note many of these issues and moments throughout the book, but then maintained my central focus on U.S.-Venezuelan relations. As Krepp graciously acknowledged in her review, an alternative course would perhaps have led me to write a different book.

Another provocative point that the reviewers advance is that the book might have benefitted from a more in-depth consideration of the importance of oil for Venezuelan politics and economics. This assertion is valid and I appreciate that the reviewers note my inclusion of data on oil prices toward the end of the book. Because I wanted to focus primarily on ideology and politics—and their fine gradations over time—in this book, I perhaps took ‘economics’ for granted as a sort of homogeneous entity. I did of course make clear at the outset that Venezuela’s vast oil reserves made it exceptional among the nations of the Caribbean Basin (for example, as a possible way for Fidel Castro to offset dependence on U.S. or Soviet oil), but my basic assumption was that there was a direct relationship between economic stability and prosperity in Venezuela and political stability and prosperity. In other words, the more the economy improved over the course of the 1960s, the more credibility the Punto Fijo Coalition gained and the more difficult it became for the left-wing insurgency to succeed in its appeals to the Venezuelan people to abandon the experiment in democratization. I think it is valid to suggest that a deeper engagement with the politics of petroleum would have added nuance and depth to the book. Again, however, I felt that I had to make choices, and that I lacked the time and space to sift through the fine grains of economics as I did with political and ideological considerations.

In terms of argument, the reviewers are critical of my assertion of Venezuela as ‘hinge,’ or ‘key country’ in the U.S. effort to direct Latin America away from Cuban influence, and tend to feel that my treatment of Venezuelan elections and democratization efforts was somewhat superficial. The question of whether Venezuela was the exceptional country in the Latin American Cold War was perhaps the original one in this research project. I will admit that, in going through the archival material, other countries like Mexico, Brazil, and Guatemala came into focus as outlets for the U.S.-Cuban rivalry, but the sources (from my interpretation) seemed to reinforce the notion that, after 1958, Venezuela functioned as the key ‘third country’ by which Cuba (and to a lesser extent the Dominican Republic of Trujillo) and the United States would try and influence the direction of hemispheric politics into a hard left-wing or right-wing vector. As I have admitted above, such a focus perhaps fell short of the more regional inquiry that the reviewers have suggested would have been more effective. Again, however, I feared that such a shift would turn an already long manuscript into an even longer and less contained one. I find Kirkendall and Velasco’s comments regarding the best way to interpret elections and democratization to be intriguing, especially their assertions that I perhaps took elections for granted as an indicator of genuine public participation in politics, or as evidence of the entrenchment of truly democratic norms. These points have merit, but the goal of this book was not so much to explore the extent to which there was true popular participation at the local level in Venezuela as much as it was to trace the movement of Venezuela away from the poles of right-wing and left-wing absolutism. For me the salient point was that Venezuela was holding truly free and competitive elections, was showing a significant level of loyalty and enthusiasm toward the array of democratic parties within the nation, and was rejecting extremism, either in the form of anti-democratic politicians or in the form of extremist insurgencies. Indeed, contrary to Kirkendall’s assertion that I fail to explain the success of

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1 See, for example, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
successive elections with high turnout, I thought I made it clear in the introduction and throughout the book that the Venezuelan public was committed to democracy (i.e. voting for candidates representing the relative center of the political spectrum) because it saw the old caudillo strongmen and the new leftist radicals as unacceptable alternatives. Particularly for the Venezuelan elections of 1963 and 1968, the key to me seemed to be the fact that there were both high turnout and fair elections at times in which the leftist insurgency was expending great efforts to disrupt the polling.

The third notable criticism that the reviewers advance is that there were significant missing pieces in my historiography. This criticism is the one that I take the most seriously and find the most troubling. I worked very hard in every stage of this process to cast a wide and comprehensive net over the relevant literature. I was especially intent on mastering the waves of historiography on U.S. foreign relations and U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War, most notably the body of literature that has emerged since the 1990s. I felt I was doing a solid job of mastering the specific literature pertaining to Venezuela as well. Based on the reviews, however, it is clear that several works escaped me, especially with regard to the body of literature produced in the 1970s and 1980s. My only defense here would be that I allowed my training as a historian of U.S. foreign relations to skew the focus I would have had as a dedicated student of Venezuelan history. I fully agree that the titles the reviewers mention would have given my book more nuance and impact. However, I do feel as though my review of the historiography is credible and comprehensive enough to make my book worthy of inclusion into this larger corpus of literature.

Again, I thank the reviewers for their time and their careful consideration of the book, and H-Diplo for providing the space for this roundtable and the opportunity for me to defend my work. The process of researching and writing this book has been both exciting and challenging, and the learning curve at times has been steep. I feel very fortunate for the chance to be evaluated by such esteemed senior scholars, and I am gratified that they found a noticeable degree of quality in the book. My concluding hope is that my work, despite the shortcomings identified by the reviewers, can still play a positive role in advancing the conversations and debates on U.S.-Latin American relations and the hemispheric Cold War. That was my central hope at this project’s first moments of conception, and it is my central hope today.