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An Implicit Hypothesis: Revisiting the American Tradition of Covert Regime Change in the Context of the Democratic Peace

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An Implicit Hypothesis: Revisiting the American Tradition of Covert Regime Change in the
Context of the Democratic Peace

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the theory of structural realism, the phenomenon of the “democratic peace” — or the near absence of war and violent conflict between modern democracies — suggests that regime type (democratic vs. autocratic) is more indicative of state behavior than the structure of the international system and that the threat of an infinite security dilemma can be eliminated. This *democratic peace theory* (DPT), which assumes “democracies rarely fight each other” due to shared democratic norms of peaceful conflict resolution and/or institutional constraints, has informed United States foreign policy for more than a century.¹ Guided by the principles of DPT, American presidents have routinely justified conflict and intervention abroad; from Woodrow Wilson’s “Request for Declaration of War” against Germany to George W. Bush’s second inaugural address, which declared “the best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”²

Of course, the theory behind this policy tradition undermines the structural realist position regarding anarchy and state behavior; it implies that widespread democratization promotes world peace and interstate trust, challenging the claim that security competition is inevitable. Accordingly, realists have sought out potential counterexamples (meaning cases of violent inter-democratic conflict) intended to challenge the assumed existence of a democratic peace. Given the limited evidence of conventional warfare between democratic states, however, examples of *covert* violence have been a cornerstone of the realist response to DPT. Specifically, critics have focused on clandestine, Cold War-era US-backed military coups that targeted elected leaders, including Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq (1953), Guatemalan president

¹ Russett et al., “The Fact of Democratic Peace,” 4.

² “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address.”

Jacobo Árbenz (1954), Brazilian president João Goulart (1964), Chilean President Salvador Allende (1973), and the Sandinista government in Nicaragua (1984).

With the exception of Chile (1973), however, the target countries in these proposed counterexamples were not “fully democratic” at the time of intervention. According to DPT scholars, they were instead anocratic at best (or even autocratic), meaning the United States was not obligated to extend the courtesy of inter-democratic trust and non-violence. And even if critics could produce more than one example of a “fully democratic” target regime, it would contribute little to the debate, as many DPT scholars frame the theory to be more forgiving of anomalies (meaning “democracies are [only] *less likely* to fight wars with each other”).³ Moreover, DPT scholars assert that Cold War regime change operations were not wars (based on the lack of battlefield death and the absence of American troops) and should thus be omitted from any critique of democratic peace theory.⁴ Citing these factors, Bruce Russett and other prominent scholars of the democratic peace have dismissed realist counterarguments rooted in covert intervention. In fact, proponents of the DPT institutional model have suggested that covert intervention against democratic governments is not only compatible but also consistent with the logic of the democratic peace. They argue that competitive elections hold democratic leaders accountable and incentivize foreign policy backed by popular support; because overt violent action against democratic governments would be “roundly denounced across the political spectrum,” democratic leaders should target fellow democracies exclusively through covert operations.⁵

³ Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” 32 (emphasis added).

⁴ Russett et al., “The Future of the Democratic Peace,” 63.

⁵ Starr, “Democracy and Integration: Why Democracies Don't Fight Each Other,” 158.

To be clear, this project does not refute the existence of a democratic peace — as Harvey Starr explains, it is difficult, “if not impossible, to find war (clearcut, large scale organized, sustained, violent conflict) between two democratic (clearcut, readily recognizable as democracy) states”⁶ — but it does suggest that the underlying assumptions of the liberal democratic peace theory are incompatible with the American tradition of covert regime change. The following analysis identifies two flaws in the DPT response to US-backed covert intervention that highlight this disconnect: (1) The majority of covert regime change missions between 1947 and 1991 supported authoritarian leaders, which contradicts an implicit (yet controversial) hypothesis of DPT — that regimes installed by US-backed covert intervention should be democracies or, at the very least, more democratic than their predecessors. Although it is not explicitly supported by any DPT scholar, this *implicit hypothesis* is consistent with the logic of democratic peace theory — especially the normative model, which attributes DP to shared democratic norms that “mandate nonviolent conflict resolution and negotiation in a spirit of live-and-let-live.”⁷ If democracies prefer inter-democratic conflict resolution due to the diminished risk of violent escalation (as the normative model suggests they do), then they should promote democracy whenever possible, and US-backed covert regime change operations should overwhelmingly support democratic leaders. To test the *implicit hypothesis* of the democratic peace, this project focuses on the following cases of Cold War intervention: Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973).

(2) The clandestine nature of covert regime change undermines the democratic structures and relationships of trust that are the basis of the DPT *institutional* model, which attributes the

⁶ Starr, 158.

⁷ Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” 586.

phenomenon of the democratic peace to competitive elections (and how these hold leaders accountable), slow and public mobilization processes (which make surprise attacks difficult), and the expectation that fellow democracies will be similarly constrained. However, covert operations not only bypass these institutional constraints but erode the inter-democratic trust they are meant to foster. On these grounds, the following analysis challenges the DPT justification of US-backed covert regime change operations, and, by extension, the fundamental principles of democratic peace theory.

This project proceeds as follows: First, I summarize the shortcomings of the existing response to DPT scholars' justification of US-backed covert regime change; second, I unpack the two leading theoretical explanations of the democratic peace (the normative model and institutional model) as they relate to the *implicit hypothesis*; third, I explain the Polity IV democracy index and justify its role in this analysis; fourth, I present three case studies of US-backed covert regime change — Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973) — that challenge the *implicit hypothesis*; and finally, I briefly explain why the practice of covert regime change is inherently incompatible with democratic peace theory (specifically the institutional model).

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE EXISTING CRITIQUE

To date, the most compelling critique of DPT in the context of covert regime change is the 2010 study *Overt Peace, Covert War: Covert Intervention and the Democratic Peace* conducted by Alexander B. Downes and Mary Lauren Lilley. In this comprehensive review of U.S. involvement in the 1973 coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende, Downes and Lilley demonstrate (among other things) a clear violation of DPT normative logic, as the target regime

was a well-established democracy. As noted in the study, Allende won the vice-presidency in a “free and fair” election and rightfully assumed the presidency when his predecessor resigned; Chile crossed the threshold for democratic status according to multiple democracy indices in the 1970s; and Washington officials acknowledged (mostly from behind close doors) the democratic tradition in Chile — even Secretary of State Henry Kissinger conceded that “Allende was elected legally” and had “legitimacy in the eyes of the Chileans and most of the world.”⁸ Downes and Lilley confirm that the United States targeted a regime they understood to be democratic, thereby undermining the normative assumption that democracies respect and trust one another. Given the narrow scope of the study, however, *Overt Peace, Covert War* reveals little more than a singular exception to the laws of democratic peace theory. Although the authors encourage readers to view their work as “part of a larger, accumulating body of evidence,” the historical record suggests Allende’s Chile was the only clear-cut democracy targeted by US-backed covert regime change efforts during the Cold War.⁹ Downes and Lilley suggest that several other cases of covert regime change operations against elected leaders — Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Congo (1960), and British Guiana (1963) — warrant further scholarly research, but at least according to the highly-respected Polity IV democracy index (one of the metrics cited in their study), these regimes were more likely anocratic (or autocratic, in the case of Congo) than democratic.¹⁰ Sebastian Rosato, a well-known DPT critic, adds Indonesia (1957) and Nicaragua (1984) to the list of possible counterexamples, but again, the targeted leaders in these cases represented anocracies.¹¹ Of course, democracy indices do not reflect all relevant details (how the

⁸ Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War,” 291.

⁹ Downes and Lilley, 285.

¹⁰ Marshall, “Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946-2013.”

¹¹ Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” 590.

backdrop of the Cold War influenced U.S. perceptions of elected leaders abroad, for example). Nonetheless, the low Polity IV democracy scores make it difficult for DPT critics to mount a case on the same grounds as Downes and Lilley (2010). Overall, fixating on counterexamples is unproductive, as most of the target regimes in question were not fully democratic, and the “democracies *rarely* fight each other” model of DPT tolerates the anomaly of Allende’s Chile. Accordingly, this project shifts the focus of the critique away from such counterexamples.

DPT: IMPLICATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The *implicit hypothesis* mostly stems from the normative model of democratic peace theory, which suggests shared normative restraints inhibit violent conflict resolution between democratic states. This “norms theory” assumes that democratic leaders are committed to the norms of “live and let live” and peaceful conflict resolution that “have been developed within and characterize their domestic political processes.”¹² Moreover, such leaders expect fellow democracies to operate under the same conditions; this expectation fosters inter-democratic respect and trust, further diminishing the likelihood of violent escalation. Put simply, proponents of the DP normative model believe that the democratic peace functions because “those who claim the principle of self determination for themselves are expected to extend it to others.”¹³ The obvious implication of this normative logic is that democratic leaders prefer a large network of democratic allies (for the sake of national security) and will therefore promote democracy over autocracy whenever possible. By the same logic, it is reasonable to expect the United States to install democratic leaders in the event of covert regime change. Downes and Lilley infer a similar hypothesis (although they limit its application to the case of the 1973 coup in Chile):

¹² Russett et al., “Why Democratic Peace,” 35.

¹³ Russett et al., 32.

Spreading democracy in the international system also decreases the likelihood of war, so one might anticipate that the regimes installed by democratic intervention would at a minimum be more democratic than their predecessors, if not full-fledged democracies. Democratic leaders understand that establishing autocratic regimes is risky since such governments are inherently aggressive. States governed by democratic institutions are peaceful toward other democracies, and thus democratic interveners should leave new democracies in their wake.¹⁴

It should be noted that no scholar of democratic peace theory “explicitly voices this hypothesis”¹⁵ (though some nearly do — Michael Doyle writes that liberal foreign policy “must attempt to promote liberal principles abroad: to secure basic human needs, civil rights, and democracy”¹⁶); nonetheless, it is consistent with the implications of DPT norms theory. If democratic states view fellow democracies as more prone to peaceful relationships compared to their authoritarian counterparts (based on well-established norms and expectations), it is only fair to assume they would prefer to install democratic allies in the event of covert regime change.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning the alternative explanation of the democratic peace, the DPT *institutional* logic (which instead attributes non-violence to political structures), as the two theoretical models are not “neatly separable.”¹⁷ Instead, as Bruce Russett suggests, they are “somewhat complementary and overlapping.”¹⁸ Factors like democratic stability, for example, represent both normative and institutional constraints according to Russett and his colleagues.¹⁹ Likewise, Russett argues that norms and institutions are both influential in terms of the inter-democratic “perceptions” that foster trust and respect.²⁰ It follows that the *implicit hypothesis* is also consistent with the institutional logic of DPT, which identifies three factors

¹⁴ Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War,” 277.

¹⁵ Downes and Lilley, 277.

¹⁶ Downes and Lilley, 277.

¹⁷ Russett et al., “Why Democratic Peace,” p. 40.

¹⁸ Russett et al., p. 41.

¹⁹ Russett et al., p. 41.

²⁰ Russett et al., p. 41.

that make wars between democratic states unlikely: First, domestic institutions and democratic processes hold leaders accountable. Reliable, competitive elections make it easy to evaluate and replace unpopular representatives,²¹ so democratic presidents are careful not to engage in wars or violent conflicts that lack popular support (especially wars against other democracies, which are apparently more likely to “provoke a public furor”).²² Authoritarian leaders face no such accountability. Second, the mobilization process is slow and public in democratic countries. Because leaders must obtain approval from “various institutions,” it takes time for democracies to “gear up” for war.²³ Moreover, the mobilization process is “immensely more public” than in autocracies, making it difficult for democracies to launch surprise attacks.²⁴ These institutional delays allow time for peaceful conflict resolution. Finally, institutional constraints develop mutual expectations that reinforce peaceful conflict resolution — democratic states assume fellow democracies face the same constraints, which shapes attitudes and behaviors when inter-democratic disputes arise. Russett explains:

If another nation’s leaders regard a state as democratic, they will anticipate a difficult and lengthy process before the democracy is likely to use significant military force against them. They will expect an opportunity to reach a negotiated settlement if they wish to achieve such a settlement. Perhaps most importantly, a democracy will not fear a surprise attack by another democracy, and thus need not cut short the negotiating process or launch a preemptive strike in anticipation of surprise attack.²⁵

Because mutual constraints related to accountability and mobilization perpetuate democratic trust, leaders do not fear surprise attacks during inter-democratic disputes and assume peaceful negotiations will have time to develop. Like its normative counterpart, this DPT institutional

²¹ Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” p. 587.

²² Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War,” 277.

²³ Russett et al., “Why Democratic Peace,” p. 38.

²⁴ Russett et al., p. 38-39.

²⁵ Russett et al., p. 38.

logic is consistent with the *implicit hypothesis* — if democratic leaders expect democratic process and slow, public mobilization to constrain violent conflict, they should prefer democratic leaders to autocratic leaders when conducting covert regime change.

METHODS

To determine the relationship between US-backed covert regime change efforts and democratization during the Cold War, the following analysis employs the renowned Polity IV data series. Using a 21-point scale (-10 to +10), the Polity IV Project calculates the democratic trajectory of individual countries going back to the first half of the twentieth century; such calculations consider factors like the “competitiveness of political participation, openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment, and institutional constraints on executive power.”^{26,27}

In a given year, countries earning a score of +6 or above are classified as democracies; those earning -6 and below are labeled autocracies (anything in between denotes anocracy, or a regime that “mixes democratic with autocratic features”).^{28,29} The Polity IV Project is well-regarded for its “long-run perspective” and in-depth explanations of democracy scores.³⁰ Moreover, Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, well-known critics of democracy indices, admit that the Polity IV data series is uniquely effective in terms of “conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation” for an index with such a broad scope (though they do point to some of the project’s faults, including the “redundant attributes” that inform rankings and a “convoluted aggregation” system).³¹ Of course, it is impossible to reduce the concept of democracy to a single numerical

²⁶ Marshall, “Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946-2013.

²⁷ Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War,” 288.

²⁸ Marshall, “Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946-2013.

²⁹ Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, And Civil War,” 16.

³⁰ Roser, “Democracy.”

³¹ Munck and Verkuilen, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy,” 29.

value without sacrificing critical information. For this reason, the following analysis also relies on comparative evidence regarding the installed regimes' relationship to conventional democratic values (i.e., competitive elections, free press, non-violence) compared to that of their predecessors.

CASE STUDY SELECTION

The following analysis is concerned with the cases of Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973) precisely because Bruce Russett and other leading DPT scholars have dismissed them as irrelevant to the debate surrounding covert intervention and the democratic peace; Russett suggests that the regimes of Árbenz, Goulart and Allende were “unstably democratic” at best, so any US-supported violence against them could not have undermined the laws of the democratic peace, and while he concedes that the leaders installed through covert regime change operations in these countries were less democratic than their predecessors, he insists that this was “not necessarily the U.S. intention” (and in any case, Russett argues the question of U.S. responsibility is irrelevant, as covert regime change operations are not the same as inter-democratic war).³² However, there is more to DPT than definitions of war and democracy; accordingly, the chosen case studies revisit the examples of US-backed covert regime change rejected by DPT scholars. Geographic location is another factor that informed case study selection. Because the chosen cases of covert regime change targeted countries in Latin America, they shed light on the United States' interest in regional dominance (and even hegemony) during the Cold War. It is also important that the regime change operations in question were successful (meaning US-backed forces assumed power), as this makes it possible to assess U.S. relations with the autocratic

³² Russett et al., “The Future of the Democratic Peace” 123.

regimes in the wake of covert regime change (which is important for determining the extent to which the United States enabled post-coup autocracy). Finally, the case studies presented below span nearly two decades (and three presidents), revealing a recurring pattern in U.S. foreign policy rather than an isolated event.

COLD WAR INTERVENTION: UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

According to Lindsey O'Rourke's bivariate analysis of "US-backed covert regime changes in a state's polity score during the Cold War," the average change in Polity IV democracy score following successful missions (those in which the "US-backed forces assumed power") was -0.79 . In the same period, countries that were not targets of regime change missions experienced an average *increase* in their Polity IV scores of $+0.73$; countries targeted by failed missions experienced an average spike of $+1.51$.³³ These figures reveal a negative correlation between democratization (as quantified by the Polity IV system) and successful US-backed covert regime change, challenging the inferred DPT hypothesis that regimes installed in the wake of covert intervention should be at least more democratic than their predecessors (if not full democracies). Of course, these correlations should be "taken with a grain of salt."³⁴ O'Rourke warns that the Polity IV bivariate correlations do not account for selection bias, noting "the same factors that led the United States to pursue a regime change against the target government may also have an impact on their level of democracy in the following ten years."³⁵ After controlling for other variables considered to influence democratization (state age, population, economic development, civil war, etc.), Washington apparently had no "consistent or significant impact on target states'

³³ O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, pg. 91 (figures based on levels of democracy ten years after intervention).

³⁴ O'Rourke, 91.

³⁵ O'Rourke, 90.

level of democratization.”³⁶ In other words, U.S. leaders may have intervened where democratic regression was already a threat, and their regime change efforts simply failed to stop the inevitable. However, O’Rourke’s cautious interpretation of Polity IV data downplays the role of U.S. support for coup leaders and dictators, which has directly undermined democracy abroad. Consider the following three case studies:

Guatemala (1954)

In 1954, the United States oversaw a successful coup (codenamed PBSuccess) that ousted Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz and installed colonel Carlo Castillo Armas. According to Polity IV data, the Castillo Armas regime was far less democratic than the one that preceded it — with a democracy score of +2, Guatemala under Árbenz qualified as an anocracy. However, following the start of U.S. covert operations, the democracy score in Guatemala rapidly declined until it hit -6, where it would remain throughout the entirety of the Castillo Armas regime (demoting Guatemala from anocratic to autocratic status).³⁷ This negative trend is supported by comparative evidence regarding the extent to which each government was characterized by democratic practices. Under Árbenz, Guatemala enjoyed certain democratic norms — First, the 1951 election that brought Árbenz to power was widely considered to be free and fair. U.S. embassy reports found no evidence of violence or government restrictions on the opposition’s campaign; instead, they blamed Árbenz’s victory on the “ineffectiveness” of the anti-communist movement in Guatemala.³⁸ Likewise, journalists and foreign policy scholars have noted the absence of foul play in the 1951 election (and the self-destructive tendencies of the opposition). As summarized by Piero Gleijeses, it was “neither political repression nor electoral fraud that

³⁶ O’Rourke, 91.

³⁷ “Polity IV Regime Trends: Guatemala, 1946-2013.”

³⁸ Gleijeses, “The ‘Christian’ Opposition,” 215–16.

robbed Árbenz's foes of victory at the polls. Bitter, petty divisions sapped their strength.”³⁹ By most accounts, including those of Washington officials, the election of Jacobo Árbenz was legitimate and fairly contested. Second, the Guatemalan press was relatively free under Árbenz. The government did not intervene when major opposition dailies like *El Imparcial* and *Prensa Libre* “virtually advocated the overthrow of the [Arbenz] regime.”⁴⁰ Keith Monroe, an anti-Arbenz journalist, has recounted the freedom and safety that he and his colleagues experienced: “Anti-communist and pro-American newspapers were still in business. They attacked the government as hotly as Hearst used to attack the New Deal, yet their editors walked the streets unharmed.”⁴¹ Finally, Árbenz embraced democratic social reform policies that aimed to expand voter rights in Guatemala.⁴²

By contrast, the Castillo Armas regime that followed embraced authoritarian practices from the outset — Castillo Armas’ own National Committee for Defense against Communism blocked other parties from participating and monitored polling stations to prevent confidential ballots in the post-coup presidential “election.”⁴³ As a result, Castillo Armas won the presidency with 99 percent of the vote. After taking office, Castillo Armas continued to systematically dismantle open political competition in the country; he branded the opposition as communists and arrested over two thousand “alleged subversives;”⁴⁴ built concentration camps for political prisoners when jails became too crowded;⁴⁵ disenfranchised over two-thirds of Guatemalan citizens; replaced local representatives as he pleased; and in his 1956 constitution, he officially

³⁹ Gleijeses, 215–16.

⁴⁰ Gleijeses, 215–16.

⁴¹ Gleijeses, 215–16.

⁴² Gleijeses, 215–16.

⁴³ Immerman, “Project PBSUCCESS: The Coup,” 177.

⁴⁴ Immerman, “Project PBSUCCESS: The Legacy,” 198.

⁴⁵ Immerman, 198.

banned organized opposition to his National Liberation Movement party.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Castillo Armas regime normalized the use of state violence against Guatemalan citizens; political prisoners were often executed or “simply disappeared,”⁴⁷ and government troops murdered an estimated 1,000 agricultural workers in the town of Tiquisate alone.⁴⁸

Judging by the Polity IV data and comparative evidence, Castillo Armas was objectively less democratic than the leader he replaced. Moreover, U.S. support for Árbenz provides a direct link to this reversal (instead of the mere correlation presented by O’Rourke). Although Castillo Armas was not necessarily Washington’s first choice — a civilian farmer named Juan Córdova Cerna may well have been placed in charge of the coup had he not been diagnosed with throat cancer) — he was eventually considered by the CIA to be the most “dependable” candidate to lead the coup and ultimately assume the presidency.^{49,50} Washington’s plan to support Castillo Armas unfolded in two phases. First, the CIA helped organize troops on the ground in Guatemala. Still on the CIA payroll from his role in the abandoned Operation PBFortune mission, Castillo Armas received funding to develop the Army of Liberation, a small band of mercenaries tasked with toppling Árbenz.⁵¹ Washington officials also supplied Castillo Armas with American planes and pilots, but they did not expect the coup plotters to succeed without phase two of the CIA’s plan: psychological warfare. The idea was to convince Árbenz that his overthrow was inevitable before any attack took place; this mostly involved distributing propaganda throughout the region and conducting fake, anti-communist radio broadcasts.⁵²

⁴⁶ Immerman, 199.

⁴⁷ Immerman, 199.

⁴⁸ Grandin, “The Blood of Guatemala,” 322.

⁴⁹ Fraser, “Architecture of a Broken Dream” 496.

⁵⁰ Immerman, “Project PBSUCCESS: The Preparation,” 141-143.

⁵¹ Immerman, “Project PBSUCCESS: The Coup,” 162-165.

⁵² Cullather, *Secret History*, 74-77.

Following the coup (and some debate among Washington officials), it was decided that Castillo Armas' was the best choice to take over as the next president of Guatemala, and Ambassador John Peurifoy cleared the path to his victory.⁵³

The U.S. also maintained a relationship with Castillo Armas in the aftermath of the coup, providing the authoritarian ruler with political advice. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles encouraged Armas to detain alleged communist citizens that were attempting to flee Guatemala, and when government officials killed six student protesters, it was Ambassador Peurifoy who advised Castillo Armas to frame the protests as nothing more than a communist plot.^{54,55} Still, some scholars question the degree of U.S. influence over Castillo Armas, noting the president did not always comply with Washington's vision of anti-communist Guatemala. According to historian Frederick W. Marks, Castillo Armas "disregarded Dulles's counsel to destroy communism root and branch, refusing to invade embassy sanctuaries and to put Arbenz and his left-wing supporters behind bars."⁵⁶ Of course, the "counsel" in question was inherently authoritarian, so if anything, Marks' example demonstrates the United States' commitment to democratic regression in Guatemala. In sum, the United States hand-picked Castillo Armas to lead the coup against Árbenz and contributed funds, military supplies and a psychological warfare campaign to ensure his success. Following Árbenz's resignation, Washington installed and then supported the Castillo Armas presidency in the form of political advice (which sometimes amounted to arbitrary arrests of the opposition). Perhaps the United States did not anticipate the extent of Castillo Armas' authoritarianism — the voter suppression, the

⁵³ Immerman, "Project PBSUCCESS: The Coup," 176-177.

⁵⁴ Immerman, "Project PBSUCCESS: The Legacy," 198-199.

⁵⁵ Cullather, *Secret History*, 115.

⁵⁶ Marks, "The CIA and Castillo Armas in Guatemala, 1954," 84.

concentration camps, the political murder — but these atrocities were at least enabled by Operation PBSuccess, suggesting a causal relationship between US-backed covert regime change and the transition from anocracy to full-blown autocracy in Guatemala.

Brazil (1964)

Through a covert regime change operation codenamed Brother Sam, the United States supported the 1964 coup d'état in Brazil, which deposed President João Goulart and installed Marshal Humberto Castelo Branco. Like in the case of Guatemala (1954), the Polity IV dataset suggests the regime that assumed power (Castelo Branco's military dictatorship) was significantly less democratic than the one it replaced. Goulart's inauguration did coincide with a modest decrease in democracy according to the Polity IV scale, but with a score of +4, the country was still a promising anocracy (and only two "points" removed from democratic status) at the time of the coup; throughout the military dictatorship that followed, the Brazilian democracy score sat at - 9, the second-lowest score on the Polity IV scale (denoting autocratic status in Brazil).⁵⁷ Also like the Guatemala case study, comparative evidence supports the implications of the Polity IV data (i.e., that Brazil was far more democratic before the coup). Although the Goulart period (1961-1964) has been described as "highly volatile if not constitutionally upsetting" due to the frequency of strikes, attempted revolts and general unrest, João Goulart was a democratically elected president (as opposed to Castelo Branco, who took the presidency by force with support from a foreign power).⁵⁸ In 1961, Goulart was elected vice president to Jânio da Silva Quadros in a presidential election considered "basically fair and free" even by DPT scholars.⁵⁹ When Quadros resigned unexpectedly just seven months into his term, then-VP Goulart was the rightful

⁵⁷ "Polity IV Regime Trends: Brazil, 1946-2013."

⁵⁸ Busey, "Brazil's Reputation for Political Stability," 870.

⁵⁹ Forsythe, "Democracy, War, and Covert Action," 388

successor. As president, Goulart was a proponent of democratic rights; in his inaugural address, he called for “unity, democracy and reform,” and his vision for “Reformas de Base” (basic reforms) included electoral reform, which aimed to expand democratic representation in Brazil by extending voting rights to the illiterate population.⁶⁰

By contrast, Castelo Branco’s military dictatorship systematically undermined the electoral process. The Institutional Act (1964), which was passed just one week after Goulart’s deposition, enabled the military to unseat left-wing elected officials in order to “[drain] the communist abscess” from Brazil.⁶¹ The Act also prevented the “wrong” candidates from seeking office by suspending the political rights of prominent opposition leaders.⁶² At the same time, however, Castelo Branco expressed a paradoxical commitment to democracy. Speaking before Brazil’s Superior Electoral Court, he explained that “there is no alternative to democratic improvement than voting. However, we must consider that there is no alternative for the country other than the existence of a legal government of the Revolution. It is definitive and irreversible.”⁶³ In essence, Castelo Branco supported a tainted vision of democracy — one that abused legislation to ensure sustained victory for the right-wing revolution. On occasion, this complex tension led Castelo Branco to act in a manner unusual for a military dictator. For example, he initially planned to relinquish power at the end of his designated term, and when pressured by the *linha-dura* (radical, uncompromising members of the military) to overturn the electoral victories of opposition candidates in 1965, he refused.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Green, “Brazil: Five Centuries of Change.”

⁶¹ Barbosa, “The Ballot Under the Bayonet.”

⁶² Barbosa.

⁶³ Fihlo, *O Governo Castelo Branco*, 371.

⁶⁴ Barbosa, “The Ballot Under the Bayonet.”

Of course, Castelo Branco's attempt to juggle democratic process and military rule was unsustainable, and he ultimately gave in to the latter. In exchange for *linha-dura* recognition of the opposition's victories, Castelo Branco agreed to embrace strict military reform, ending the semblance of democratic concern under the military dictatorship in Brazil. Through the Second Institutional Act (1965), Castelo Branco outlawed the existing political parties — replacing them with one pro-government party (the National Renewal Alliance Party) and one opposition party (the Brazilian Democratic Movement) — and extended his presidential term. In 1967, he drafted a new, authoritarian constitution that established indirect federal elections (meaning the military would select presidents), increased presidential terms from four to five years, and restricted civil rights (specifically the right to assemble).⁶⁵ Among other repressive measures, Castelo Branco passed the infamous *Lei de Imprensa* (press law), which imposed “stiff penalties for reporting what the government considered damaging to national security or financial stability.”⁶⁶ And while Castelo Branco was less prone to political violence than his successors, the military dictatorship's torture practices against left-wing opposition began under Castelo Branco.⁶⁷

Like in Guatemala (1954), Polity IV data and comparative evidence confirm that Brazil was significantly less democratic following US-backed covert regime change efforts. Once again, declassified evidence suggests this reversal was no coincidence — instead, it makes clear that CIA ties to Castelo Branco and the Brazilian military in 1964 enabled the early years of the military dictatorship. Due to the covert nature of Brother Sam, U.S. policy regarding Goulart “remains cloudy,” but there is no doubt that the CIA provided clandestine support to Castelo

⁶⁵ Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, 1967.

⁶⁶ Hirschberg, “Brazil,” 405.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Torture in Brazil*.

Branco in preparation for the coup against Goulart.⁶⁸ On March 28, 1964 (mere days before the coup), in a now-declassified telegram to the U.S. Department of State, Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon called for, among other measures, “a clandestine delivery of arms of non-US origin...to be made available to Castelo Branco supporters in Sao Paulo.”⁶⁹ Days later, Secretary of State Dean Rusk responded to Gordon’s request with a list of White House decisions regarding material support for Castello Branco — Washington was to contribute U.S. naval tankers loaded with petroleum and oil; 110 tons of ammunition and related supplies; and a naval task force (including an aircraft carrier and several destroyers).⁷⁰ Goulart was deposed in the “bloodless coup” before most of the authorized supplies could reach Brazil, but the intention was clear: the United States was prepared to support Castelo Branco should the conflict escalate to the point of violent military revolution.⁷¹ As President Johnson told Undersecretary of State George Ball on the day before Goulart was officially overthrown: “I think we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do.”⁷² Cryptic as it was, Johnson’s message effectively gave “the green light” to back a violent coup if necessary. In the same declassified telegram, Ambassador Gordon references some ongoing covert regime change efforts in Brazil, including multiple CIA-supported “pro-democracy street rallies” and the clandestine promotion of “democratic and anti-Communist sentiment” in all sectors of Brazillian society, including “congress, armed forces, friendly labor and student groups, church, and business.”⁷³ Gordon also suggests that future covert action plans may require additional “modest

⁶⁸ Forsythe, “Democracy, War and Covert Action,” 388.

⁶⁹ “State Department, Top Secret Cable from Rio De Janeiro, March 27, 1964.”

⁷⁰ “State Department, Secret Cable to Amb. Lincoln Gordon in Rio, March 31, 1964.”

⁷¹ Forsythe, “Democracy, War and Covert Action,” 389.

⁷² “White House Audio Tape, President Lyndon B. Johnson discussing the impending coup in Brazil with Undersecretary of State George Ball.”

⁷³ “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil (Gordon) to the Department of State,” March 28, 1964.

supplementary funds.”⁷⁴ However, as many relevant documents remain classified, it is impossible to assess the full extent of CIA involvement on the ground in Brazil, and it is unclear whether such plans were ever developed.

Compared to the case of Guatemala (1954), the United States was less involved in the regime that assumed power following covert intervention in Brazil. Still, President Johnson and Ambassador Gordon maintained a relationship with Castelo Branco after he was selected as the first leaders of the military dictatorship. On several occasions, Johnson wrote Castelo Branco to express his admiration and appreciation for the new regime in Brazil. Eleven months after taking office, Castelo Branco received the following notice from Johnson: “I have been deeply impressed by the exceptional efforts which you and your government have been making to strengthen your country...I want you to know that you have our own good will and support in your endeavors.”⁷⁵ A few months later, Johnson wrote a similar letter to express the sense of “pride” and “hope” he felt knowing that Brazil was “being shaped with such strength and integrity by [Castelo Branco’s] leadership.”⁷⁶ However, it should be noted that these messages of approval predated the Second Institutional Act (1965), meaning Castelo Branco was still operating under the pretense of democratic practice when they were composed. Still, the original Institutional Act (1964) — albeit less severe than its sequel — was already in effect and had breached democratic rights in Brazil, so Johnson’s continued support for the new president in Brazil was misguided.

Despite the praise he received from Johnson in the early days of the military dictatorship, Castelo Branco eventually forced Washington officials to reconsider their perception of his

⁷⁴ “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil.”

⁷⁵ “Johnson Unable to Visit Brazil,” 1965.

⁷⁶ “Close Relations between The U.S. and Brazil for Peace and Progress in the World,” 1965.

performance. After the passing of the Second Institutional Act, an especially alarming development, Ambassador Gordon met with the Brazilian president to express his grave disappointment. Gordon berated Castelo Branco for what he considered to be a “major setback” in the effort to “bring about full constitutional normalization without jeopardizing basic purposes of revolution.” Considering Gordon endorsed Castelo Branco as the leader of the military revolution on account of his reputation as a “highly competent, discreet, honest, and deeply respected officer [with] strong loyalty to legal and constitutional principles,” it is possible the ambassador was genuinely surprised by the increasingly authoritarian state of the regime in Brazil (even though the original Institutional Act foreshadowed the anocratic practices to come). Regardless, Gordon should have known better than to expect democratic achievement from a military president installed via coup against an elected leader. In spite of his disappointment, Gordon insisted the Second Institutional Act represented a “lost battle but not necessarily a lost war” in terms of Brazil’s future, implying the United States still believed in the new regime.⁷⁷ Indeed, the emergence of the revised, strictly authoritarian Institutional Act seemed to have little effect on President Johnson’s attitude toward Castelo Branco — nearly a year after the Act was passed, in yet another letter to the Brazilian president, Johnson lauded the “continuance of the strong bonds of alliance and friendship between [the] two nations.”⁷⁸

In sum, the United States supported Castelo Branco’s revolution through CIA-backed demonstrations and propaganda campaigns, and it planned to contribute extensive military equipment to the cause if the conflict escalated. Although it was less involved in the post-coup government than in the case of Guatemala (1954), the United States celebrated Castelo Branco’s

⁷⁷ “Telegram From the Embassy in Brazil to the Department of State,” November 3, 1965.

⁷⁸ “Telegram re: 1966 Brazil Independence Day,” 1966.

presidency and maintained a friendly relationship with the regime even after the Second Institutional Act critically undermined democracy and political rights in Brazil. Accordingly, the democratic regression in Brazil (which is confirmed by Polity IV data and comparative evidence) was continually enabled and supported by the United States.

Chile (1973)

The U.S. played a significant, covert role in the 1973 coup that toppled Chilean President Salvador Allende and installed General Augusto Pinochet. As was the case in Guatemala (1954) and Brazil (1964), the replacement regime was much less democratic than the target regime according to Polity IV data. With a democracy score of +6, Allende's Chile (1970-73) was considered fully democratic. When Pinochet and his military junta assumed power, however, that democracy score plummeted to -7, transforming Chile into an autocracy (based on the Polity IV scale).⁷⁹ Also like the case studies presented above, comparative evidence reflects this authoritarian transition — Allende's Chile was widely regarded as democratically legitimate, whereas Pinochet led one of the most repressive and violent dictatorships the world has ever seen.

Although he only obtained a plurality of 36.6 percent, Allende was democratically elected in 1970 — even prominent DPT scholars like Forsythe admit the 1970 election in Chile was “reasonably free and fair.”^{80,81} Moreover, the democratic process that elected Allende was well established. Paul Sigmund notes that Chile had a “long history of democracy and a tradition of social reform going back to the 1920s, when it first adopted social security programs and a

⁷⁹ “Polity IV Regime Trends: Chile, 1946-2013.”

⁸⁰ Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War,” 289.

⁸¹ Forsythe, “Democracy, War, and Covert Action,” 389.

labor code.”⁸² Crucially, (given the emphasis DPT places on the democratic aggressor’s understanding of the target country’s regime type), documented exchanges between Washington officials reveal a similar understanding of Chilean democracy. In a 1964 memorandum to Central Intelligence director John McCone, J. C. King — the chief of the CIA’s Western Hemisphere Division at the time — explained why it would be impossible to persuade the Chilean congress to elect the runner-up in the event of an Allende plurality (the eventual result of the 1973 election): “It is unlikely that many parliamentarians will conclude that their reelection will be best assured by going against the will of the people by flouting Chile’s proud democratic spirit and by assuming the responsibility for the civil unrest that would follow such a decision.”⁸³ In another memo, this time from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to President Nixon, Kissinger conceded: “Allende was elected legally. . . He has legitimacy in the eyes of the Chileans and most of the world; there is nothing we can do to deny him that legitimacy or claim that he does not have it.” Before the coup in 1973, Chile’s democratic tradition was respected by domestic politicians, observed by scholars and recognized (perhaps reluctantly) by the Nixon administration.

In the wake of the coup, that tradition was soon erased. Led by Pinochet, the military junta immediately banned leftist parties (and ultimately all political parties) in Chile.⁸⁴ Moreover, Pinochet directed a historic, far-reaching campaign of political violence against left-wing opposition. Expanding on the findings of the Rettig and Valech reports (which investigated deaths, disappearances and human rights abuses under Pinochet) a 2011 human rights

⁸² Sigmund, *The United States and Democracy in Chile* 15.

⁸³ “Chief of the Western Hemisphere Division J. C. King, memorandum to Director of Central Intelligence McCone,” January 3, 1964.

⁸⁴ Stern, “Indifferent Memory: Closing the Box on the Past,” 101.

commission in Chile concluded that during Pinochet's 17-year rule, the total number of victims of political repression (those who were detained, tortured, exiled, kidnapped, murdered or survivors of assassination attempts) exceeded 40,000 — more than 3,000 of these victims were murdered.^{85,86} Like his approach to opposition parties, Pinochet embraced this repression from the earliest days of the military dictatorship. Starting in late September 1973 (the same month as the coup against Allende), Pinochet's "Caravan of Death" executed more than 75 individuals in military custody across the country.⁸⁷ The violence of the Pinochet regime also transcended Chile's borders; the US-supported Operation Condor, a state terror network of right-wing intelligence agencies in South America, enabled Pinochet to track and kill dissidents in neighboring countries, Europe, and in the infamous case of former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier, the United States (Pinochet directly ordered the car bombing that took place in Washington, D.C.).^{88,89}

Even more so than in the cases of Guatemala (1954) and Brazil (1964), the regime that followed US-backed covert regime change in Chile was unquestionably less democratic than its predecessor. Compared to the operations in Guatemala and Brazil, however, the United States maintained a "discreet distance" from the 1973 coup against Allende. Still, previously classified documents reveal that the CIA provoked the coup "at every step."⁹⁰ As noted in the memorandum entitled "Genesis of Project FUBELT" (the CIA codename for covert regime change efforts against Allende), President Nixon authorized ten million dollars for the operation;

⁸⁵ "Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation."

⁸⁶ Long, "Chile recognises 9,800 more victims of Pinochet's rule."

⁸⁷ Pereira, "Review of Chile, Pinochet, and the Caravan of Death," 157-161.

⁸⁸ McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*, 1.

⁸⁹ Franklin, "Pinochet directly ordered killing on US soil of Chilean diplomat, papers reveal."

⁹⁰ Kinzer, "We're Going to Smash Him," 190.

a secret cable to Henry Hecksher (the CIA station chief in Santiago) details Kissinger's explicit orders related to Allende: "It is firm and continuing policy that Allende be overthrown by a coup...We are to continue to generate maximum pressure toward this end utilizing every appropriate resource;"⁹¹ and in another cable, the CIA directs its station in Santiago to "induce as much of the military as possible, if not all, to take over and displace the Allende govt."^{92,93,94} Again, the United States' role in the coup that toppled Allende was indirect compared to other Cold War-era covert regime change operations — as Kissinger told Nixon over the phone in the wake of the coup, "We didn't do it... we helped them."⁹⁵ — but it was no less influential. Although he goes on to make the misguided argument that covert intervention and DPT are compatible, David Forsythe effectively summarizes the significance of U.S. covert operations in Chile:

Despite Kissinger's protestations of innocence, one cannot meet clandestinely with military officials and urge them to use force against an elected President, then credibly disclaim any responsibility for the subsequent violent coup, even though it was carried out by others...Covert violent action to overthrow a government may assume a leading or supporting form. When it takes the latter, it is still intervention.⁹⁶

More damning is the well-documented evidence of U.S. ties to the Pinochet regime following the 1973 coup. In 2000, the CIA released "CIA Activities in Chile," which exposed previously withheld details regarding covert relations with Pinochet's Chile. By its own admission, the agency "actively supported the military Junta after the overthrow of Allende" and "many of Pinochet's officers were involved in systematic and widespread human rights abuses...Some of

⁹¹ "CIA, Genesis of Project FUBELT."

⁹² Russett et al., p. 41.

⁹³ "CIA, Genesis of Project FUBELT."

⁹⁴ Quoted in Kinzer, "We're Going to Smash Him," 190.

⁹⁵ Stone and Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States*. 377

⁹⁶ Forsythe, "Democracy, War, and Covert Action," 190.

these were contacts or agents of the CIA or US military.”⁹⁷ The report confirms that within a year of the coup, the CIA was well aware of certain human rights abuses in Chile, including more than twenty murders connected to the “Caravan of Death” campaign. According to the report, the CIA also knew about the “bilateral cooperation among regional intelligence services to track the activities of and, in at least a few cases, kill political opponents” — this arrangement would later become the infamous Operation Condor.⁹⁸ Moreover, the report exposes the CIA’s relationship with one of Operation Condor’s eventual founders, General Manuel Contreras, who, as head of the DINA (Pinochet’s secret police), coordinated the international assassinations of left-wing political opponents. Despite emerging evidence of Contreras’ role in political violence and the consensus that he was the “principal obstacle to a reasonable human rights policy within the Junta,” some CIA officials recommended a paid relationship with the DINA leader. The proposal was dismissed, but unspecified “miscommunications in the timing” led to Contreras receiving a one-time payment from the CIA. Overall, the U.S. policy community approved of the relationship, as Contreras was head of the primary intelligence agency in Chile and had unique access to Pinochet.⁹⁹ In sum, the United States and CIA directed a covert campaign in order to provoke a coup against the democratically elected Salvador Allende, effectively undermining a widely-celebrated democratic tradition; following the coup, the U.S. turned a blind eye to historic, systematic political violence and human rights abuses committed by officers in the Pinochet regime, some of whom were CIA contacts. Therefore, the steep democratic regression in Chile (which is supported by Polity IV data and comparative evidence) was directly connected to US-backed covert regime change efforts.

⁹⁷ Kornbluh, “CIA Acknowledges Ties to Pinochet’s Repression.”

⁹⁸ “CIA Activities in Chile,” 6.

⁹⁹ “CIA Activities in Chile,” 16-18.

POTENTIAL CRITIQUES OF CASE STUDY EVIDENCE

Although the case study evidence presented above implicates the United States in the autocracy that followed covert regime change in Guatemala, Brazil and Chile (challenging the *implicit hypothesis*), it is necessary to address two potential counterpoints before proceeding: (1) *The CIA conducted some covert regime change operations independently; therefore, it is unclear whether U.S. leaders embraced the anti-democratic nature of such operations.* While the CIA occasionally conducted small-scale covert operations independently and in “ways that seem reckless in hindsight” (especially in the early years of the Cold War), the agency never acted without executive approval when it came to large-scale covert regime change operations.¹⁰⁰ In fact, it seems that CIA officials often expressed “serious reservations” regarding certain covert missions but were ultimately overruled and forced to carry out presidential orders. Otis G. Pike, House Representative and chairman of the Pike Committee (which investigated controversial CIA practices including those related to covert regime change efforts), famously summed up this relationship; following the committee investigation, Pike reported “evidence, upon evidence, upon evidence where the CIA said: ‘No, don’t do it,’ [but] the State Department or the White House said, ‘We’re going to do it.’”¹⁰¹ Likewise, Pike stressed that the CIA “never did anything the White House didn’t want. Sometimes they didn’t want to do what they did.”¹⁰² The Pike Committee evidence not only challenges the DPT counterargument anticipated above, but it is consistent with a key component of the opposing structural realist theory — the *unitary actors assumption*, which treats states as single entities (instead of distinguishing presidents from

¹⁰⁰ O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 34.

¹⁰¹ Jacobsen, “Chapter 15: Revenge,” 224-225.

¹⁰² Jacobsen, 224-225.

intelligence agencies, for example) that take measures to maximize survival and security (e.g., overthrowing unfavorable regimes), regardless of variables like culture, economic structure and, of course, regime type.¹⁰³

(2) *The United States viewed its support for autocratic regimes as a means to a liberal end; the authoritarian leaders installed through US-backed covert regime change operations during the Cold War were expected to defeat communism in their respective countries and promote democracy abroad in the long run.* American diplomat Jeane Kirkpatrick famously defended this logic in her 1979 essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards” (which ultimately influenced the foreign policy strategy of the Reagan administration). According to Kirkpatrick, it was in fact necessary to support autocratic leaders through covert regime change efforts, as they were ultimately more susceptible to democratization than their left-wing counterparts. She insisted there was “no instance of a revolutionary ‘socialist’ or Communist society being democratized,” whereas right-wing autocratic regimes “do sometimes evolve into democracies — given time, propitious economic, social, and political circumstances, talented leaders, and a strong indigenous demand for representative government.”¹⁰⁴ However, it is unlikely that Washington’s preference for autocratic leaders reflected genuine, long-term interest in democratization, as there was no evidence at the time to suggest left-wing regimes were any less capable of democratic development.¹⁰⁵ Considering the absence of such evidence, Kirkpatrick’s essay really implies that the architects of certain Cold War-era covert regime change operations prioritized regional *power* — i.e., squashing Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere — over democracy (the section that follows dives deeper into the motives behind U.S. relations with

¹⁰³ Spaniel, *Game Theory 101*, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards.”

¹⁰⁵ O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 244.

autocratic leaders during the Cold War). Yes, Guatemala, Brazil and Chile have now been democratic countries for decades, but it is more than a stretch to attribute this achievement to the Cold War interventions. Polity IV data highlights the disconnect: More than four decades of turbulent regime trends separate Operation PBSuccess and democratic Guatemala (according to the Polity IV 21-point scale).¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Brazil did not pass the threshold for democratic status (a score of +6) until twenty years after Operation Brother Sam.¹⁰⁷ By the same metric, seventeen years passed between Operation FUBELT and Chile's democratic recovery.¹⁰⁸

REGIONAL HEGEMONY OVER DEMOCRATIZATION

So *why* did the United States undermine the implicit logic of the democratic peace (i.e., support/install autocratic leaders instead of ones that would advance democracy)? One possibility relates to the specific context surrounding covert regime change operations. Melissa Willard-Foster argues that moments of great-power rivalry (like the Cold War) incentivize the overthrow of democratic leaders in favor of “compliant authoritarian ones,” as authoritarian leaders are not held accountable by an inclusive electorate and are therefore more likely to “acquiesce to the demands of great powers during disputes.”¹⁰⁹ George Kennan, an American Diplomat and avid proponent of Soviet containment, endorsed this sentiment in 1948, asserting it was “better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal one if it [was] indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by communists.”¹¹⁰ Assuming this logic did influence the Cold War-era covert regime change operations, there is still the question of inconsistency. After all, a number of US-backed covert regime change efforts supported democratic leaders.

¹⁰⁶ “Polity IV Regime Trends: Guatemala, 1946-2013.”

¹⁰⁷ “Polity IV Regime Trends: Brazil, 1946-2013.”

¹⁰⁸ “Polity IV Regime Trends: Chile, 1946-2013.”

¹⁰⁹ Willard-Foster, “A Peace Too Costly to Keep,” 32.

¹¹⁰ Willard-Foster, 32.

Why, then, did the United States favor authoritarian leadership in the present case studies? One popular theory suggests that matters of economic imperialism encouraged covert support for authoritarian leaders, as the left-wing governments in Latin America jeopardized business interests of American multinational corporations. This theory is enticing, as American businesses like the United Fruit Company (UFCO) in Guatemala and International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) in Chile lobbied for regime change, and the United States was presumably interested in defending domestic companies from international business restrictions. However, the historical evidence suggests that the economic interest of American multinationals was not the primary motive in these cases of pro-authoritarian covert regime change operations. Richard Bissel, the mind behind Operation PBSuccess, insisted UFCO's agenda did not play a "significant role" in the decision process, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was apparently so unmoved by ITT lobbyists that he did not even think it necessary to inform President Nixon of their visits.¹¹¹

The historical record appears more consistent with another proposed factor — the pursuit of regional hegemony. According to O'Rourke, covert operations are *hegemonic* when the "intervener is trying to acquire or maintain hegemony over a certain geographic region to obtain the military, political, and economic benefits associated with being a regional hegemon."¹¹² The idea that the United States would prop up illiberal governments through covert intervention for the sake of hegemonic control is consistent with the theory of *offensive* realism, the branch of structural realism that expects states to maximize power (as opposed to Kenneth Waltz' original model of structural realism, now called *defensive* realism, which expects states to instead

¹¹¹ O'Rourke, 32.

¹¹² O'Rourke, 5.

prioritize security). John Mearsheimer, the founder of offensive realism, explains that “great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power.”¹¹³ Because global hegemony is infeasible, a rational state settles for the next best thing — regional hegemony. In the context of the Cold War, the United States perceived left-wing developments in Latin America as a symbol of Soviet influence and a threat to its dominance in the Western Hemisphere (i.e., a “challenge by another great power”) and on multiple occasions, the United States decided a “compliant” authoritarian regime was the most effective manner of containing that threat.¹¹⁴ Returning to the case studies, it becomes clear that anti-democratic covert regime change efforts in Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973) were primarily motivated by factors related to regional hegemonic control.

Guatemala (1954)

Although the Eisenhower administration had various ties to UFCO (Secretary of State John Foster Dulles worked for the law firm that represented UFCO; his brother, CIA director Allen Dulles, was a former member of the UFCO board of directors; and the company’s top PR manager was married to Eisenhower’s private secretary, Ann Whitman)¹¹⁵ Operation PBSuccess was less about defending a multinational corporation from left-wing land reform — there was apparently “no desire to pull the fruit company’s chestnuts out of the fire”¹¹⁶ — and much more about containing the spread of communism in Guatemala and the surrounding region. Still, Washington recognized that Guatemala posed no “direct military or economic threat” and was

¹¹³ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 35.

¹¹⁴ Willard-Foster, “A Peace Too Costly to Keep,” 32.

¹¹⁵ Moye, “The United States Intervention in Guatemala,” 47.

¹¹⁶ O’Rourke, *Covert Intervention*, p. 31.

not officially linked to the Soviet Union (Árbenz appointed communists to his cabinet, legalized the Guatemalan Party of Labor and was close with the party leader, José Manuel Fortuny, but he never publicly identified as a communist himself).¹¹⁷ As one State Department message reports, the United States instead worried that a communist development in Guatemala would “prevent collaboration of that country with the United States in event of future international crisis, and to disrupt hemisphere solidarity and weaken the United States position.”¹¹⁸ A Policy Planning Staff document entitled “Our Guatemala Policy” elaborates on this position:

The real and direct threat that Guatemala poses for her neighbors is that of political subversion through the kind of across-the-borders intrigue that is a normal feature of the Central American scene. The dangers of Communist contagion and is most immediate with respect to Guatemala’s immediate neighbors. The Communist infection is not going to spread to the U.S., but if it should in the fullness of time spread over much of Latin America it would impair the military security of the Hemisphere and thus of the U.S.¹¹⁹

Judging from declassified documents, the consensus among Washington officials was that the most significant threat posed by Árbenz was to the cohesion of U.S. regional dominance, not to security or economic stability.

Brazil (1964)

In a 1964 telegram to the U.S. State Department (the same telegram that called for “a clandestine delivery of arms” to Castelo Branco’s supporters days before the coup), Ambassador Lincoln Gordon described the impending threat of communist takeover in Brazil. However, by Gordon’s own admission, several factors stood in the way of a communist Brazil under Goulart. First, the “Goulart movement” (which was supported by members of the Brazillian Communist Party) represented only a “small minority—not more than 15 to 20 percent of the people or the

¹¹⁷ O’Rourke, 119.

¹¹⁸ O’Rourke, 119.

¹¹⁹ Policy Planning Staff, “Our Guatemala Policy,” Doc. 457.

Congress.”¹²⁰ Second, while there were “a number” of left-wing officers in the Brazillian armed forces, Gordon noted the “overwhelming majority [were] legalist and anti-Communist,” and even included “long-standing right-wing coup supporters.”¹²¹ Finally, while Gordon feared Goulart’s “campaign to seize dictatorial power” could lead to a communist state in Brazil, he also suspected the president would “hope to turn against his Communist supporters on the Peronist model which [the ambassador believed] he personally preferr[ed].”¹²² In sum, Goulart’s communist push had relatively few supporters, the military was largely stacked against the Brazillian president, and there was apparently reason to question his communist allegiance. Nevertheless, Gordon warned that inaction would be “unacceptable,” as Brazil was a country of great “strategic importance to the U.S.” (presumably because of its size and location within the Western Hemisphere).¹²³ In a 1963 meeting among high-level Washington officials (including Gordon and President Kennedy) regarding the Goulart presidency, Secretary of State Dean Rusk expressed the same sentiment: “It’s clear that Brazil is a country that we can’t possibly turn away from. Whatever happens there is going to be of decisive importance to the hemisphere.”¹²⁴ Washington officials like Gordon and Dusk believed that a communist state in Brazil would undermine the United States’ influence in the hemisphere (i.e., regional hegemonic control), so they took the unlikely threat seriously.

¹²⁰ “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil (Gordon) to the Department of State,” March 28, 1964.

¹²¹ “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil.”

¹²² “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil.”

¹²³ “Telegram From the Ambassador to Brazil.”

¹²⁴ “Excerpts from John F. Kennedy’s conversation regarding Brazil with U.S. Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon,” March 8, 1963.

Chile (1973)

The United States' understanding of the hegemonic threat posed by Allende's Chile is best summarized in a memorandum from the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs to Henry Kissinger. Responding to Kissinger's National Security Study Memorandum 97, which requested an "urgent review" of the U.S. position and policy options in the event of an Allende presidency, the group of State, Defense and CIA representatives anticipated minimal domestic or international consequences. The group described the United States as having "no vital national interests within Chile" and expected Allende's victory to be insignificant in terms of disrupting the global balance of military power.¹²⁵ Moreover, the group doubted the likelihood of any "threat to the peace of the region."¹²⁶ What did concern the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs, however, was the possibility of Allende's Chile undermining the United State's regional dominance. The group reported the following: "We see as one of Allende's goals the extirpation of U.S. influence from Chile."¹²⁷ Additionally, the group warned Kissinger that "*Hemispheric cohesion* would be threatened by the challenge that an Allende government would pose to the OAS (the Organization of American States), and by the *reactions* that it would create in other countries"¹²⁸ Like in the case of Guatemala (1954), the United States was more concerned about a possible chain reaction of regional defiance than the threat of a singular communist development.

¹²⁵ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs (Meyer) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," August 18, 1970.

¹²⁶ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs."

¹²⁷ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs."

¹²⁸ "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Group for Inter-American Affairs" (italics, parenthesis my own).

These findings reflect a larger Cold War trend — looking at 1947-1991, O’Rourke identifies a total of eighteen covert regime change attempts related to the pursuit of regional hegemony (ten of which were successful).¹²⁹ Of course, this leaves out the majority of Cold War-era covert regime change operations. According to O’Rourke, the remaining interventions fall into one of two categories: *offensive* regime change and *preventive* regime change. As the name would suggest, offensive regime change efforts are those that replace “current military threats with less hostile regimes.”¹³⁰ Preventive regime change operations, meanwhile, preserve the status quo and replace leaders that “may threaten the intervener’s security in the future.”¹³¹ Judging from the Polity IV data across all Cold War-era covert regime operations, these classifications yield different results in terms of democratization (or the lack thereof). It seems that autocratic transitions are most closely associated with hegemonic regime change operations (by a lot). The average change in democracy score among successful hegemonic interventions was -2.22; without the outlier (Chile 1980s), the average change drops to -4.25. Of the nine successful *hegemonic* operations between 1947 and 1991, six experienced a negative change (while only two showed improvement, and the remaining cases experienced no change in Polity IV democracy score).¹³² Within the same time frame, the United States conducted a total of twelve successful *preventive* covert regime change operations. Only three of these operations correspond to positive changes in Polity IV democracy score (four correspond to negative change, and the remaining five show no change at all). Nevertheless, the average change in democracy score across all cases of successful preventive interventions was +0.58 (meaning the

¹²⁹ O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 3.

¹³⁰ O’Rourke, 36.

¹³¹ O’Rourke, 38.

¹³² Marshall, “Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946-2013.”

few increases in democracy score were substantial). Finally, the three successful *offensive* covert regime change efforts — all of which correspond to positive changes in Polity IV democracy score — saw an average change of +9.33.¹³³ Although this number is consistent with the *implicit hypothesis* of the democratic peace, it represents only a small fraction of Cold War-era covert regime change operations. The figures presented above are inconclusive without a broader analysis of U.S. covert activity, but they do suggest that the United States is significantly more likely to support authoritarian leaders when motivated by hegemonic pursuit.

The case study evidence and Polity IV data refute the claim that DPT logic is compatible with US-backed covert regime change. First, there is an overarching negative correlation between the Cold War-era regime change interventions and democratization (as demonstrated by Polity IV data and comparative evidence), which suggests that the United States failed to promote democracy abroad. Moreover, the United States actively subverted democracy on numerous occasions by providing support (advice, funding, military supplies) to anti-democratic coup leaders and maintaining friendly relationships with the authoritarian regimes that assumed power. Finally, US-backed covert regime change operations are apparently more likely to undermine democracy and support autocratic leaders when regional hegemony is at stake; this finding is consistent with the implications of structural realism (or at least the offensive realism subset). Not only does the American tradition of covert regime change challenge the *implicit hypothesis* of democratic peace theory, but it supports the competing theory of offensive realism.

¹³³ Marshall, “Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946-2013.”

THE MYTH OF INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Even if the *implicit hypothesis* of democratic peace theory was more consistent with the practice of US-backed covert regime change, the DPT justification of this practice would be unsatisfactory, as the very act of covert regime change is incompatible with the logic of DPT (primarily the institutional model). Nevertheless, DPT scholars have suggested the two can coexist. David Forsythe, the first to do so, explores two theoretical explanations as to why the Cold War interventions fail to undermine the logic of DPT (though he never uses the term) in “Democracy, War and Covert Intervention.” First, citing Doyle’s neo-Kantian understanding of democratic states (i.e., those with “separation of institutions, a political alliance with other liberal states, and a commitment to essentially private commerce”), Forsythe notes that the Cold-War targets were likely denied the benefits of inter-democratic trust because they were not fully democratic in the eyes of the United States:

The crucial point in this interpretation is that an elected government allowing some practice of internationally recognized human rights may still not be a mature liberal state in the neo-Kantian sense. Thus force is not theoretically or automatically ruled out between liberal states and these weak, non-liberal states.”¹³⁴

Here Forsythe effectively summarizes the DP norms model justification of covert regime change operations — some elected leaders represent non-democracies (at least according to more established democratic nations), and the laws of the democratic peace do not apply to such leaders. Considering the low Polity IV democracy scores of the target countries in question (with the clear exception of Allende’s Chile) and the American association between left-wing practices and the suppression of democracy during the Cold War, the logic behind Forsythe’s first proposal is fairly sound. But again, this project accepts that the majority of target regimes during the Cold

¹³⁴ Forsythe, “Democracy, War and Covert Action,” 393.

War were not model democracies; it is instead interested in how DPT logic is inherently incompatible with the entire American tradition of covert regime change. In this light, Forsythe's second proposal is far more problematic. He suggests that covert regime change efforts are compatible with the logic of DPT precisely because of their clandestine nature, noting "the decisions are not taken in the open, subject to the full range of checks and balances and popular participation."¹³⁵ Other DPT scholars go as far as to argue that covert regime change is in fact a byproduct of the democratic peace. Harvey Starr, an ardent DPT defender, suggests that democratic leaders resort to covert intervention as not to disturb the democratic peace, noting overt violent action against elected governments would "generate high levels of opposition, and leaders wish to keep them out of the open democratic political process."¹³⁶

Yes, these arguments tolerate the "inherently anti-democratic" nature of covert regime change (to use Starr's own words), but the bigger issue lies in the unavoidable fact that covert regime change operations bypass the institutional constraints assumed to prevent violent conflicts between democratic states. First of all, democratic leaders are largely immune to domestic political backlash when acting covertly. No matter the strength of democratic institutions, voters are unable to hold leaders accountable when kept in the dark (of course, even democracies must withhold information from the public, but DPT institutional logic relies heavily on transparency related to violent conflict). As a result, democratic leaders expect to get away with less favorable policy decisions (e.g., violent action against other democracies). Indeed, most details related to covert regime change operations do not emerge until years after the fact (if at all). Second, cover regime change operations lack the "slow and public"

¹³⁵ Forsythe, 393.

¹³⁶ Starr, "Democracy and Integration," 158.

mobilization process that impedes surprise attacks and ensures built-in time for peaceful conflict resolution. Likewise, democratic leaders may act defensively around democracies that have a long-standing reputation of covert intervention (instead of ruling out surprise attacks and expecting time for peaceful negotiations to develop), increasing the likelihood of violent escalation. Finally, if democratic leaders can circumvent institutional constraints by way of covert intervention, why shouldn't they expect fellow democracies to take similar measures? This attitude undermines the tradition of inter-democratic trust and peaceful conflict resolution observed by proponents of the DPT institutional model.

CONCLUSION

Again, this project does not refute the existence of the democratic peace. Instead, it challenges the argument that the liberal theory *surrounding* the democratic peace (DPT) is compatible with the historical record of US-backed covert regime change. To this end, the project has established and justified the so-called *implicit hypothesis* of DPT, which suggests that US-backed covert regime change missions should overwhelmingly support democratic leaders (or leaders that are at the very least more democratic than their predecessors). While it is common knowledge that the majority of Cold War interventions failed to promote democracy, the case study evidence presented in this analysis underscores the remarkable extent to which replacement regimes undermined democratization in certain target countries. Beyond the steep drop in Polity IV democracy scores — from +2 to -6 in Guatemala (1954); from +4 to -9 in Brazil (1964); and from +6 to -7 in Chile (1973) — comparative evidence reveals a dramatic increase in autocratic practices (voter suppression, state violence, etc.) following covert intervention: In the case of Guatemala, Carlo Castillo Armas disenfranchised the majority of Guatemalan citizens, banned

opposition parties, and imprisoned and executed left-wing dissidents after seizing power from the Jacobo Árbenz regime, which, although only an anocracy (at least according to the Polity IV scale), was the product of a free and fair election and had an established reputation for free press tolerance; in Brazil, the military dictatorship of Humberto Castelo Branco — which ultimately outlawed the existing political parties in Brazil, drafted the highly authoritarian Constitution of 1967, and passed the infamous *Lei de Imprensa* — replaced the João Goulart regime (another elected anocracy); and in Chile, Augusto Pinochet dismantled the nation’s “proud democratic spirit” during his seventeen-year reign of political murder and repression, which replaced the fully democratic regime of Salvador Allende. Although some scholars have downplayed the United States’ role in these transformations, previously classified documents reveal a direct link between US-backed covert regime change operations and the immediate rise of autocracy in the case study target countries. First, the United States cleared the path for authoritarian regimes to assume office. In Guatemala (1954) and Brazil (1964), the United States supported the right-wing opposition forces with military supplies and propaganda campaigns; and while the covert operations in Chile (1973) were not as directly involved in the eventual military coup, they nonetheless provoked and supported the plot against Allende. In a variety of ways, U.S. leaders then supported the authoritarian regimes that they helped come to power (for example, the Eisenhower administration offered political advice to Castillo Armas; President Johnson maintained a friendly relationship with Castelo Branco; and Nixon’s CIA kept Pinochet officers as contacts). These anti-democratic Cold War interventions have important implications for the larger debate surrounding state behavior: both the normative and institutional models of DPT suggest that the democratic peace functions in part because of the shared expectation that

peaceful resolution is more likely (if not guaranteed) during inter-democratic conflicts; this would suggest that democratic leaders understand democracy to be the key factor in terms of achieving and maintaining peaceful relations, and their foreign policy decisions should reflect this understanding (hence, the *implicit hypothesis*). Judging from the case study evidence, however, democratic leaders sometimes find it favorable to subvert democracy. Specifically, the cases of Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973) suggest that democratic leaders will prioritize regional hegemony over democratization during moments of great-power rivalry (e.g., the Cold War). Declassified documents reveal that the primary objective of the case study regime change operations was to stamp out Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere (which Washington officials interpreted as a challenge to regional dominance), as the left-wing target regimes did not pose a serious threat to national security or economic stability. Installing democratic regimes would have jeopardized this objective, as there was no guarantee that voters in target countries would reject socialist and communist leadership; therefore, Washington officials opted to support right-wing autocracies in Guatemala, Brazil and Chile (among other countries). The Polity IV dataset reflects this logic — based on democracy score trends, there is a significant negative correlation between democratization and hegemonic covert regime change operations during the Cold War.

Of course, US-backed regime change efforts do not always undermine democracy. Especially in the post-Cold War era, democracy promotion has played “a larger role” in U.S. foreign policy.¹³⁷ However, this development only supports the narrative that states sacrifice democracy during moments of great-power rivalry. As demonstrated by Francis Fukuyama’s

¹³⁷ O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 229.

1989 essay “The End of History,” U.S. policymakers assumed that the collapse of the Soviet Union marked an end to global ideological tension — Western democracy had emerged as the “final form of government.”¹³⁸ Accordingly, these policymakers reasoned that foreign populations shared their “commitment to liberal values,” so democratic elections abroad no longer threatened ideological cohesion or regional dominance.¹³⁹ By contrast, the uncertainty of the Cold War meant that U.S. leaders often deemed autocracy promotion to be a necessary expense. The practice of subverting democracy in favor of regional hegemony complicates the *implicit hypothesis* and is consistent with the assumptions of offensive realism — a theory that directly challenges the fundamental principles of DPT. Moreover, the very act of covert regime change contradicts the logic of DPT (especially the institutional model), as clandestine operations bypass the institutional constraints (political accountability; slow and public mobilization processes) to which some scholars attribute patterns of inter-democratic trust and peaceful conflict resolution. For these reasons, democratic peace theory is incompatible with the American tradition of covert regime change.

¹³⁸ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 4.

¹³⁹ O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 229.

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