

The U.S. and Revolutionary Nationalism: Bolivian Case

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## **I. Introduction:**

In October 2020, declassified documents were made available by the National Security Archive on “Che Guevara and the CIA in the Mountains of Bolivia.” These documents detail U.S. involvement and conversations about the threat of a guerrilla movement led by Guevara. They highlight the theme of U.S. exceptionalism to intervene in revolutionary nationalist movements in Professor Brazinsky’s lectures. In the documents, people within President Johnson’s administration emphasize the U.S. superior role in eliminating the extreme nationalist threat. Johnson was not the first to deal with revolutionary nationalists in this manner. The precedent was set with Eisenhower and continued with Kennedy also using various operations to deal with Castro in Cuba. The American belief in exceptionalism has led U.S. foreign policy to consistently intervene and try to eliminate threatening leaders of revolutionary nationalism in Guatemala, Cuba, and Bolivia.

## **II. Revolutionary Nationalism**

American exceptionalism stems from the idea of a city upon a hill. Though this city was not literally on a hill, John Winthrop used the analogy of “a city on a hill” in his 1630 speech to his fellow Puritans traveling on the Arabella. The Puritans coming to the Americas held the idea that they were elevated above others as they were unique in their religious beliefs and elevation above other people.<sup>1</sup> Through the years, the belief in the U.S.’s religious and political uniqueness led American exceptionalism to take root as people believed the U.S. would pose as a model to the world. As the U.S. increasingly viewed itself as superior to other nations, it led to American foreign policy being driven by their belief of superiority compared to other countries and a unique example for the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Brazinsky, Gregg, “Session 2: The Origins of American Foreign Policy”

The U.S. perspective of revolutionary nationalism is rooted in American exceptionalism. Revolutionary nationalism is a broad name for political movements that can range in the underlying ideological, cultural, religious, and other interests of one's nation. However, all types of revolutionary nationalism hope to establish a new order through a revolution at the expense of other countries. Because extreme nationalism tended to create a new order contrary to U.S. interests, it was seen as a threat to U.S. foreign policymakers. It resulted in various operations against revolutionary nationalist leaders. When other countries did not follow the U.S.'s expectations, American policymakers stepped in and assumed superior authority for the situation.

Not until after World War II and the ending of European colonialism did the world frequently see revolutionary nationalism. During Eisenhower's presidency, he confronted revolutionary nationalism around the global south. Countries like Iran, Egypt, Guatemala, Cuba, and other African and Asian states, experienced waves of revolutionary nationalism after being victim to colonialism for a prolonged time.<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower saw these movements as a threat to U.S. exceptionalism because they created opportunities for communism to gain a hold of the states. Communism was seen as a threat to American exceptionalism. In his "Military-Industrial Complex Speech," Eisenhower acknowledges the long-term struggle the U.S. will face with communism. He states, "but we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions."<sup>3</sup> As the U.S. built up its security and defense against the "communist-enemy," these ideas of protecting the world from communist ideals in order to promote American exceptionalism drove Eisenhower to remove revolutionary nationalist leaders that posed a threat.

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<sup>2</sup> Brazinsky, Gregg, "Session 18:Eisenhower Confronts Revolutionary Nationalism"

<sup>3</sup> Eisenhower, Dwight "Military-Industrial Complex Speech"

An example of Eisenhower's removal of a revolutionary nationalist threat can be seen in Guatemala. Arbenz comes to power and "commands substantial popular support despite evidence of opposition in the capital," according to the CIA memorandum. In Guatemala, Arbenz has the popular support of the people; however, Arbenz's hostile actions and policies are seen as a threat to the U.S. Arbenz's revolutionary goals are not in the interest of the U.S. for political and ideological reasons. A CIA memorandum shows the U.S. is afraid of "communist subversive activities extending across the Guatemalan border" if Arbenz's government were to be influenced by them.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. fears the possibility of spreading his revolutionary ideals through Latin America. American exceptionalism is shown through the superior way the U.S. assesses the situation and decides Guatemala is no military or economic threat; therefore, they remove Arbenz from power.

Similarly, the Kennedy administration also assumes its exceptional power against Cuba's revolutionary movement. The threat of Cuba was laid out in a White House Memorandum on "The Cuban Problem." This memorandum provides a "summary of the problem and alternative approaches to it."<sup>5</sup> Cuba was a threat because of Castro's increasing alignment with the USSR, especially concerning acquiring missiles. According to Castro in an interview, he acknowledges that he was already thinking "that no profound changes were possible in Latin America without a revolution similar to the one... in our country," leading him to want to pursue more transformative goals throughout Latin America.<sup>6</sup> To eliminate the threat of Cuba, Kennedy believed in America's exceptional power to combat revolutionary nationalist ideas and prevent the spread of Castro's ideas in Latin America. He approved covert operations called the Bay of

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<sup>4</sup> CIA, "51. Memorandum for the Record"

<sup>5</sup> White House Memorandum "The Cuban Problem"

<sup>6</sup> Castro, Fidel "CNN Cold War Interviews- Fidel Castro"

Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose to “get rid of Castro in any way.”<sup>7</sup> Kennedy’s belief in the U.S.’s exceptional strength against Castro was underestimated as he ended up not succeeding in his attempts to get rid of Castro.

### **III. Bolivia Primary Source Background**

In 1967, Ernesto “Che” Guevara began his revolutionary nationalism plans in Bolivia. The primary source documents from the National Security Archive span from April to October 1967 and include one other document from June 1975. Guevara was an Argentine revolutionary who had been Fidel Castro’s top man in helping defeat the CIA’s Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban Missile Crisis, and other aspects of the Cuban Revolution. Guevara had a penchant for aiding other revolutionaries after his time in Cuba. Bolivia was Guevara’s next target to “implant revolutionary foco,” otherwise known as his revolutionary nationalist guerilla plan.<sup>8</sup> In 1967, Guevara began his new revolutionary plan through guerilla warfare in Bolivia. From his past activities, he had many revolutionary and communist contacts. One such man was Jules Régis Debray, a French intellectual, “who got detained and charged with aiding a guerrilla movement.”<sup>9</sup> Debray’s capture was the catalyst for Che Guevara to be identified as the guerrilla leader and led the U.S. to conduct overt and covert operations in Bolivia.

Guevara’s strategy was to start a revolutionary movement in Bolivia that would spread to other Latin American countries. He believed that Bolivia was a modest place to begin his campaign in Latin America. In a CIA intelligence cable of Guevara’s diary, his goal was stated that said the “primary mission was to form an iron-strong nucleus that would serve as an example.”<sup>10</sup> To do this, Régis Debray explains Guevara had five main principles or the Guerrillas

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<sup>7</sup> Brazinsky, Gregg, “Session 20: The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Alliance for Progress”

<sup>8</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Guerrilla Band in Southeast Bolivia under the Command of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara”

<sup>9</sup> Prados, John, and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, “Che Guevara and the CIA in the Mountains of Bolivia”

<sup>10</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Highlights of ‘Che’ Guevara’s Diary”

including “nationalization of all natural resources, ... of all foreign capital, to solve the indian problem by continuing the projects..., unspecified projects of economic developments, and to create and call for the support of, other revolutionary groups in Latin America.”<sup>11</sup> These policies were intended to be exported to other Latin American countries through guerrilla warfare tactics. However, despite some early success, Guevara faced several issues from “neglected tenets of his own and others’ revolutionary theory... the death of Bolivian recruits... and the assistance the United States gave to Bolivian authorities.”<sup>12</sup> Though, Guevara believed the spark of his revolutionary nationalism in Latin America would ignite and spread even in the face of death.

#### **IV. Johnson Administration and Revolutionary Nationalism**

The Johnson administration was concerned with the possibility of Guevara leading the guerilla movements in Bolivia. At first it was unknown to the U.S. and they spent three months trying to confirm Guevara’s location and possible role in the revolutionary guerrilla activity. Guevara was a potential threat to the U.S. from his revolutionary past in Cuba. An NSC memorandum in May 1967 noted that there are credible reports of Guevara “alive and operating in South America,” though they “need more evidence before concluding that Guevara is operational.”<sup>13</sup> One month later, they confirmed Guvara’s presence. However, the CIA memorandum highlighted, “it has been evident from the outset that Cuba has played a key role in the initiation implementation and execution of guerrilla activity in Bolivia.”<sup>14</sup> Cuba’s role in the movement heightened the U.S.’s concern more. They were concerned of it leading “to a government composed of a loose coalition of leftist parties” and worry that the USSR could take advantage.<sup>15</sup> These long-term concerns led the U.S to want to eliminate the threat fast.

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<sup>11</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Statements by Jules Régis Debray...”

<sup>12</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Highlights of ‘Che’ Guevara’s Diary”

<sup>13</sup> NSC Memorandum “Walt Rostow to President Johnson”

<sup>14</sup> CIA Memorandum, “Cuban Inspired Guerrilla Activity in Bolivia”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The role of Cuba's communist influence in Bolivia's guerilla movement concerned the U.S. However, there is conflicting evidence that shows the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research provided information that suggested there was not a serious guerilla threat. In contrast, the CIA tended to be more urgent in pursuing the threat. The State Department's "Crisis Management in Bolivia," stated that "there have been rumors of possible new guerrilla 'fronts', but such reports seem somewhat overdrawn and unrealistic" as it points to the size, recruiting, and the forces abilities to not pose "a serious threat to the government."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, a CIA intelligence memorandum states that "the Bolivian guerrillas are a well trained and disciplined group... well-schooled in the insurgency techniques and doctrines previously espoused by Guevara," showing assumed power and strength.<sup>17</sup> The CIA's assessment heightens the U.S.'s concern for the situation further. By showing the guerillas as a significant threat, the U.S. officials quickly see a greater need for U.S. intervention.

Despite the State Department's evidence of the guerrilla movement not being a severe threat, the Johnson Administration saw the CIA's evidence of Cuba's involvement in the movement to be more serious. The U.S. began to act faster in their plans to eliminate the threat. In the State Department's Cable from La Paz in 1967, one can see the urgency the U.S. saw in the Bolivia guerilla situation when they say "the army must come up with some kind of quick success" because they identify that the guerrillas "are at present maintaining contact with Salta, Argentina; Venezuela, and even Cuba."<sup>18</sup> The urgency is there because of the communist influence these guerrillas have from countries like Cuba.

The U.S. urgency led them to take control of the situation as it was believed they were the only ones capable to handle the threat. The U.S. did not believe in the Bolivian army's ability to

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<sup>16</sup> State Department Intelligence Note, "Crisis Management in Bolivia"

<sup>17</sup> CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Bolivian Guerrilla Movement: An Interim Assessment"

<sup>18</sup> State Department Cable, "Guerrilla Situation- Bolivia"

take care of the threat, so they initiated operations in the country. It was noted in a CIA memorandum, that “the Bolivian guerrillas are a well trained and disciplined group. The insurgents are better equipped than the untrained, poorly organized Bolivian military forces.”<sup>19</sup> The CIA assessment of the situation was used to justify involvement, as it assumes Bolivia’s incapability and American exceptionalism as a superior power to eliminate the threat. The communist implications, combined with belief of well-trained guerrillas and a poorly trained Bolivian army, led the U.S. to lead operations.

American exceptionalism continued to drive the Johnson administration’s intervention operations in Bolivia. In a Sept. 1967 CIA memorandum from William Bowdler to Walt Rostow, they accredited the guerrilla movement’s success “to the ineptitude of the Bolivian military” who need to be “better led and equipped “ to face a threat.<sup>20</sup> The United States believed that they had the superior strength to lead this fight against the guerrilla movement as they anticipated “nothing on the horizon would indicate that the guerilla problem will ease soon.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, the U.S. sent in a special forces team to help them train for the mission. The U.S. saw the threat of revolutionary nationalism Bolivia so extreme, it led the CIA to send in covert assistance. In the NSC Memorandum of Conversation, William Bowdler and Bolivian Ambassador Sanjines-Goytia discuss this “‘hunter-killer’ team to ferret out guerrillas” and that the idea “came from friends of his in the CIA.”<sup>22</sup> The U.S. was the one to initiate their involvement in Bolivia because they believe they were the only ones able to defeat the threat. In the end, the CIA’s undercover agents were successful in capturing Guevara, and it led to his death. During

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<sup>19</sup> CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The Bolivian Guerrilla Movement: An Interim Assessment”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>NSC Memorandum “Conversation of William Bowdler and Bolivian Ambassador Sanjines-Goytia”

Johnson's presidency, American exceptionalism was shown through the U.S. intervention with military training and covert operations against revolutionary nationalism activity in Bolivia.

#### **V. Effects of American Exceptionalism in Revolutionary Nationalist Movements**

American exceptionalism drove the U.S. to believe they knew what was best to handle the situation they considered threatening but overlook the will of revolutionary nationalism. In Guatemala and Cuba, the leaders had the popular support of the people. The U.S. may have removed Arbenz and tried to remove Castro, but it does not consider the nationalist sentiments those people have within those countries. By removing revolutionary nationalist leaders, one may thwart the movement now, but the ideology remains. The U.S. believed they had the right and power to remove these leaders but in removing or attempting to remove a leader with lots of popular support, they fed the nationalist movement. Nationalist movements in Latin America occurred during Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson's terms, and continued for years to come. Whether or not the U.S. successfully removed a leader, U.S. operations on a broad scale would be considered unsuccessful as revolutionary nationalist movements continued to plague U.S. relations worldwide.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

The United States believes in its superior ability to stop revolutionary nationalism threats through the removal of a leader. The idea of American exceptionalism in revolutionary nationalism is supported throughout Professor Brazinsky's lectures. Revolutionary nationalism was a threat to U.S. principles as most had a perceived communist threat. Guatemala, Cuba, and Bolivia, all show that the U.S. believed they were the ones who could eliminate revolutionary nationalism by intervening and removing the leader. Some operations conducted were successful, but ultimately it didn't stop the spread of revolutionary nationalism throughout the world.

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### Peer Review Feedback Changes

In my peer review, Eden highlighted three areas for improvement including capitalizing “City Upon a Hill,” reworking my conclusion to be stronger and adding more on the U.S. views of the Bolivian military. For capitalizing “City Upon a Hill,” I choose not to take this because in my writing I was referring to an actual quote in his speech and the idea of a city on a hill rather than the title of his speech which should be capitalized. In my essay’s conclusion, I reworked the sentences and tried to emphasize my points more. Lastly, I rewrote and organized my section on the Johnson Administration and Revolutionary Nationalism. I appreciated what she noted as I saw through a re-read that I had skipped over this point and only mentioned it briefly and assumed it through the other document quotes I pulled from. However, from this same advice, I didn’t use this quote to show an “example of how the CIA recognized the support these revolutionary movements had but chose to move ahead with the political parties that served their own interests,” because from my reading of the documents I did not see the revolutionary movements having much support, rather it was the U.S. overselling the issue to persuade U.S. action in the region. Therefore, I added in the quote from document 11 to strengthen my argument of it leading to the U.S. belief in their ability to take charge of the situation.