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# US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CUBA: HISTORICAL ROOTS, TRADITIONAL EXPLANATIONS AND ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

This article examines the various interpretations of the root causes of US foreign policy towards Cuba. Examining 250 years of policies articulated and defended by prominent US foreign policy decision-makers, the authors decide that geopolitical, economic and ideological explanations of why the US has behaved towards Cuba the way it has need to be supplemented by an understanding of the counter-revolutionary US foreign policy agenda. Drawing upon North American scholars, many of whom have been critics of US policy, and interpreted by a US and Cuban scholarly lens, the article suggests that examinations of the fundamental motivations for US policy go beyond common explanations and should be applied to the recent dramatic announcements by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro that relationships between the two countries will be significantly changing in the near future.

**Keywords:** foreign policy, US, Cuba, hegemony, imperialism, neocolonialism, Cold War

Immediately after taking power in 1959, the new Cuban government took steps to implement the Moncada Programme.<sup>1</sup> Such actions amounted to a strong and swift structural transformation that began incorporating new property and class relations. These actions included limiting the possibilities for private capital accumulation. The Cuban government saw these actions as a means to achieve economic sovereignty and social justice. The initial reaction of the US government – with the additional support of the Cuban propertied class – was to gradually apply economic pressure in the form of economic sanctions,

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political and diplomatic isolation, military threats and covert actions aimed at overthrowing the government.

Consequently, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution marked the beginning of a process of profound socio-economic and political transformations representing a clean break with the prevailing social, economic and political patterns in the rest of the Western Hemisphere – a geopolitical space that had been a Monroe Doctrine-inspired US hegemonic domain.

The idea of ‘revolution’ refers, in the case of Cuba, not only to a fundamental transformation of economic and political structures, people’s consciousness of their place in society and the values that should determine human behaviour, but also to a projection of Cuba’s experience onto the entire Western Hemisphere. In that sense, there had been no precedents in the Latin American context. As Samuel Farber has recently reminded us, authentic revolutions ‘have reverberated in other lands as the idea spread that there are alternatives to oppressive systems that another world is possible’.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, the Cuban revolution was also a symbolic challenge to global US hegemony.

Moreover, revolution is not a fixed ‘thing’ but a process. This means changes in structures, patterns of behaviour, and consciousness are changing over time and, in the case of revolution, are moving towards, rather than away from, more complete human fulfilment. Some nations, such as the US, might see revolutionary ferment in various places as a threat to their commitment to the maintenance of a status quo. This hypothesis underpins the arguments presented below about the root causes of US foreign policy towards Cuba since the founding of the US itself. This view contradicts many other interpretations of the *causes* of US/Cuban conflicts. The materials below refer to a variety of prevailing causal explanations of US foreign policy towards Cuba. But in the end, it is argued that none are as powerful an explanatory tool as that which hypothesises the fundamental contradictions between Cuban revolutionary ferment in search of national realisation and the US hegemonic quest for the maintenance of a status quo throughout the Western Hemisphere.

### **Competing Explanations for the Reasons behind the Historical Relationship between the US and Cuba**

US policymakers and academics have postulated various explanations or rationales for US foreign policy behaviour in the Western Hemisphere, since the early nineteenth century and beyond. These rationales have become part of common political discourse, especially in relations with Cuba. US policy, it is claimed, has been explained as basically built upon geopolitics, economic interest, ideology and/or national security.

## The Geopolitical Rationale

The expansionist ambition of the US, given Cuba's size and proximity, has made the latter a prime target, since the early decades of the nineteenth century. The importance of Cuba to the interest of the US has become a central topic of US geography and diplomacy, since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. It figured prominently in Jefferson's expansionist idea of an 'Empire for Liberty'. In 1809, he wrote to Madison:

I would immediately erect a column on the southernmost limit of Cuba and inscribe it ne plus ultra in that direction ... it will be objected to our receiving Cuba that no limit can be drawn to our future acquisitions.<sup>3</sup>

During the first half of the nineteenth century, many authors and politicians portrayed Cuba's importance as a natural fact of geography, a sort of cartographic commonsense. It was John Quincy Adams, then secretary of state in President James Monroe's administration, and later president himself, who summarised that trend. He did so by formulating a doctrine that declared Cuba's fate ineluctably and inevitably linked to the US. Adams saw the importance of Cuba's geographical location and claimed the universal application of the 'politico-geographical law of gravity', a doctrine known as the 'Ripe Fruit' that spoke of natural ties between Cuba and the US. It was fully articulated in a letter of instructions to the US ambassador to Madrid, Hugh Nelson, on 28 April 1823. In that, Adams admitted that 'Cuba, almost in sight of our shores, from a multitude of considerations has become an object of transcendent importance to the political and commercial interests of our union'.<sup>4</sup> Adams elaborated further, 'It is scarcely possible to resist the conviction that to annex Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable for the continuance and integrity of the Union itself.'<sup>5</sup>

This would entail natural ties between Cuba and the US and the inevitability of a formal US embrace of Cuba, as the small island would not be able to stand by itself as a nation. These points in the Adams letter also reflected an ideological dimension of US ruling elites in this early period that would endure over time and arguably have a strong influence on this day in US/Cuba policy.

The idea of adding Cuba to the Union appeared in the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. President James Monroe declared that he considered Cape Florida and Cuba as forming the mouth of the Mississippi. Therefore, these geopolitical and geostrategic considerations were seen as dominating the actions of the US ruling elites in the pre-Civil War period. Adams, Jefferson and Monroe represented the national feeling of the ruling elites during the first half of the nineteenth century.

With growing pre-Civil War division in the US, northern capitalists showed interest in acquiring Cuba. In 1859, the US secretary of state presented a geological rationale for the necessity and the inevitability of having Cuba by claiming that ‘every rock and every grain of sand on that Island were drifted and washed out from American soil by the floods of the Mississippi’.<sup>6</sup>

Secretary of State John Clayton was firm in asserting that ‘this government [is] resolutely determined that the Island of Cuba should never be ceded to any other power than the United States’.<sup>7</sup> This geopolitical concern was based on the fact that the British North American provinces had rejected the ideas of the US republic and welcomed British economic ties and political institutions as a guarantee of their security and prosperity. With control of Cuba, the British would become a greater security concern, a check on US expansionism and a formidable opponent of the Southern plantation system based on slavery. Britain was also the US’ leading commercial rival and the Atlantic’s major exponent of abolition of slave labour.

The southern planters had other reasons for their geopolitical and geostrategic impulse for conquest of Cuba. Inspired by the ideas of Manifest Destiny, writers, adventurers and filibusterers, in their quest for new slave states, saw Cuba as an important addition.

Beyond proposals to purchase Cuba coming from the White House,<sup>8</sup> most offers directly reflected the interest of the southern planters; the southerners continuously elaborated and expressed their views to justify the acquisition of Cuba. They saw the acquisition of Cuba as concomitant with the strengthening of their security and the strengthening of their institutions, vis-à-vis the industrial and manufacturing north.

The Ostend Manifesto in 1854 was one of the most straightforward pieces of writing on the geopolitical and geostrategic rationale for acquiring Cuba: ‘Cuba [in its present condition] has thus become to us an unceasing danger, and a permanent cause of anxiety and alarm.’ The document addressed a larger moral imperative with a sense of urgency: ‘The Union can never enjoy repose, nor possess reliable security, as long as Cuba is not embraced within its boundaries.’

The authors of the Ostend Manifesto, all US ambassadors in Europe with strong ties to southern expansionist interests went on to conclude that

It must be clear to every reflecting mind that, from the peculiarity of its geographical position, and the considerations attendant on it, Cuba is as necessary to the North American republic as any of its present members, and that it belongs naturally to that great family of States of which the Union is the providential nursery.<sup>9</sup>

After the Civil War, the Caribbean Basin where Cuba stands out prominently became even more attractive as the next frontier in the nation’s southern

geopolitical projection. The main expression of this trend was the US intervention and occupation of Cuba from 1898 to 1902 and the nation building experiment that Cuba was forced to adopt from then until 1959.

### The Economic Interest Rationale

Economic interest also animated some of the most important debates and rationales to explain the need for acquiring Cuba. For the white population in the Mississippi Valley, trade with Cuba and maritime routes were high on the agenda. One well-known Cuban history published in 1850 asserted,

It is sufficient to look over the extensive valley of the Mississippi to understand that the natural direction of its growth, the point of connection of its prodigious European commerce, and of its rational defense, is Cuba. Situated as it were on the very path, in other hands, and with different institutions, Cuba is a wall that divides and interrupts their manifest growth; commanding as she does the narrow channels of Yucatan, and Florida from Cape San Antonio and the Mayzi Point.<sup>10</sup>

Another volume by Alexander Jones, who was overtly sympathetic to the filibustering expeditions to acquire Cuba, wrote that ‘from the slightest inspection of the map, Cuba was vital to the United States and especially to the Valley of the Mississippi’.<sup>11</sup>

In the US post-Civil War period especially during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the US has pursued markets for its industrial, manufacturing and agricultural surpluses, and sources of raw materials. This trend was very well articulated by one of the architects of Pan Americanism, the then Secretary of State James Blaine, in his Waterville Speech of 1890. He declared that

the United States had reached a point such that one of its highest duties was to enlarge the area of its foreign trade ... Our great demand is expansion; I mean expansion of trade with countries where we can find profitable exchanges.<sup>12</sup>

During this historical period, the commercial necessity came to the forefront in US–Cuba policy. US economic interests in Cuban mining and sugar sectors gained prominence impacting dramatically on Cuban society and culture. Paradoxically, despite Spanish political and military domination, the Cuban economy began to be organised increasingly around its commercial relations with the US. Depending increasingly on US markets for imports and exports, economic connections shaped Cuba’s production strategies, local consumption, migration patterns and political discourse.

In 1869, 62 per cent of all Cuban exports (mainly sugar) went to the US and only 3 per cent to Spain.<sup>13</sup> According to an early twentieth-century study,

by 1890 the US was the main market for Cuba's exports with a dollar value of US\$58,557.641, which amounted to 82 per cent of the total for that year.<sup>14</sup> By the 1880s, nearly 94% of Cuba's sugar production was exported to the US.<sup>15</sup> The Spanish colonial authority sought to contain this trend. However, they soon realised that it was irreversible and opted to profit from it.<sup>16</sup> The US had become Cuba's de facto economic metropolis.<sup>17</sup> In sum, before the US intervention in 1898, Cuba was already a mono-crop economy heavily dependent on the US market.

After the Spanish/Cuban/American war, the US secured its geopolitical and economic interests in Cuba for decades to come. Successive Cuban governments would be political allies of the US, and Cuba's economy would become thoroughly dependent on the northern neighbour.

### **The Ideological Rationale: US as a Benign Hegemon**

Ideological discourse justifying US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere can be traced back to the nineteenth century as enunciated by the Monroe Doctrine. In the specific case of Cuba, some authors claimed that it needed a benign hegemon, as they described the paternalism which became a feature of US policy towards Cuba. Even before Cuba gained independence from Spain, Cuba was infantilised or alternatively gendered as female by government officials and popular culture in the US. During the 1890s, as influential US politicians lobbied for war with Spain over Cuba, major US newspapers portrayed Cuba as a damsel in distress as the Spanish sought to crush the Cuban independence movement.

These representations of an inherently inferior Cuba appeared in American cartoons, official statements and popular discourse, making US tutelage seem necessary.<sup>18</sup> The war that came to be known in the US as the Spanish American War was a construct that overlooked the nationalist anti-colonial struggle of important sectors of the Cuban society begun in 1868, minimised the participation of the Cubans and subsequently denied them participation in the negotiations after the Spanish surrender.

Shortly after the US victory in the Spanish/Cuban/American war, Indiana Senator Beveridge articulated what was to become the new ideology of American empire linking economics to Godly purpose: 'We will establish trading posts throughout the world as distributing points for American products.'

Great colonies, governing themselves, flying our flag and trading with us, will grow about our posts of trade, and American law, American order, American civilization, and the American flag will plant themselves on shores hitherto bloody and benighted.<sup>19</sup>

The US intervention in the second phase of Cuba's war of independence in 1898 significantly shaped the evolution of the future island state. It comported with Senator Beveridge's ideas. It aborted a national liberation struggle and ushered in a military occupation during which the instruments of US neocolonial domination of Cuba were institutionalised. By replacing Spanish rule, with neocolonialism, the US was extending its hegemonic design over Cuba, establishing a protectorate that would permit optimal capital accumulation and prevent the emergence of a fully independent nation state. The geopolitics, economics and ideology were combined to create and rationalise a neocolonial agenda.

The Teller Amendment passed by Congress after the war left a loophole as it declared that the US disclaimed 'any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over the island except for the pacification thereof'.<sup>20</sup> However, that phrase made it possible for Congress to rationalise passage of the Platt Amendment, which became the main element of the US neocolonial domination of Cuba. As the second US pro-consul in Cuba, General Leonard Wood, stated candidly in a 1901 private letter to President Theodore Roosevelt that "there is, of course, little or no independence left in Cuba under the Platt Amendment".<sup>21</sup>

The Platt Amendment in its preamble set very clearly the real intention and objectives of the US intervention:

In fulfillment of the declaration of the joint resolution approved April 20, 1898, the President is hereby authorized to leave the government and control of the island to its people as soon as a government shall have been established in said island under a constitution which, as a part thereof or in ordinance appended thereto, shall define the future relations of the United States with Cuba.<sup>22</sup>

Within a few years of the US colonisation of Cuba and the Philippines, President Theodore Roosevelt elaborated on the US world mission. He spoke of the necessity of promoting peace and justice in the world: a project that required adequate military capabilities both for 'securing respect for itself and of doing good to others'. To those who claimed that the US sought material advantage in its activist policy towards the countries of the Western Hemisphere, Roosevelt responded that such claims were untrue. The US, he said, was motivated by altruism: 'All that this country desires is to see the neighbouring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship'.<sup>23</sup>

Cuba was an example, he said:

If every country washed by the Caribbean Sea would show the progress in stable and just civilization which with the aid of the Platt Amendment Cuba has shown since our troops

left the island, and which so many of the republics in both Americas are constantly and brilliantly showing, all questions of interference by the Nation with their affairs would be at an end.

He assured Latin Americans in this address to Congress in 1904 that

... if they thus obey the primary laws of civilized society they may rest assured that they will be treated by us in a spirit of cordial and helpful sympathy. We would interfere with them only in the last resort ...<sup>24</sup>

During a presentation in Norway in 1910, Roosevelt praised the US for leaving Cuba as promised after the war to return only temporarily because of ‘... a disaster ... a revolution’, such that ‘... we were obliged to land troops again’. The president proudly declared,

And before I left the Presidency Cuba resumed its career as a separate republic, holding its head erect as a sovereign state among the other nations of the earth. All that our people want is just exactly what the Cuban people themselves want – that is, a continuance of order within the island, and peace and prosperity, so that there shall be no shadow of an excuse for any outside intervention.<sup>25</sup>

The Roosevelt and Beveridge statements illustrate a prevalent school of thought that holds that the US was motivated to play a benevolent and civilising role in Cuba for reasons of ideology, not interest. Those who supported the ideology regarded many Cubans as unappreciative and badly behaved.

Earlier on 18 January 1909, to the Methodist Episcopal Church (‘The Expansion of the White Races’), Roosevelt applauded the increasing presence – he estimated 100 million people – of ‘European races’ throughout the world. The indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere had been assimilated with their ‘intruders’ with the end result ‘that the Indian population of America is larger today than it was when Columbus discovered the continent, and stands on a far higher plane of happiness and efficiency’.

To highlight the missionary message Roosevelt added,

Of course the best that can happen to any people that has not already a high civilization of its own is to assimilate and profit by American or European ideas, the ideas of civilization and Christianity, without submitting to alien control; but such control, in spite of all its defects, is in a very large number of cases the prerequisite condition to the moral and material advance of the peoples who dwell in the darker corners of the earth.<sup>26</sup>

Before the reader dismisses these simplistic racist statements, it is useful to examine more recent proclamations of the motivations for US foreign policy,

particularly towards Latin America. It is worth remembering that recent US presidents, including Barack Obama, have quoted favourably from the words of Theodore Roosevelt on various subjects, draped in more contemporary ideas such as American exceptionalism and America as ‘the indispensable nation’.

In order to correct Cuba’s instability or ‘bad behaviour’, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the US army intervened in Cuba in 1906–09,<sup>27</sup> 1912 and 1917 to contain diverse kinds of nationalist mobilisations. This period would lay the groundwork for the relations between Cuba and the US for the next six decades. Invariably, the US accompanied the interventions with insincere proclamations about seeking to serve the interests of the Cuban people.

After the Platt Amendment was formally abrogated, in 29 May 1934, under Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbour Latin America policy, the US government sent the soon-to-be-appointed Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles to Havana to forestall political rebellion generated by the opposition to the Gerardo Machado dictatorship. Welles was to help reform the neocolonial model and chose a Cuban military leader who became the US main Cuban ally for the next 20 years, Fulgencio Batista.

Batista was quick to offer Cuba’s cooperation when Caribbean stability became a concern during World War II. While there were no more military interventions, the American ambassador was in a unique position in Cuba’s domestic political scene. ‘If I breathe out of one nostril harder than the other it may provoke a political crisis’, wrote the US Ambassador Spruille Braden from Havana.<sup>28</sup>

### **The US and the Cuban revolution: The East–West ideological and geopolitical rationale**

After the end of the Second World War, a new bipolar international order emerged. In pursuit of its geopolitical and national security goals in Latin America, the US succeeded in institutionalising its domination of the Western Hemisphere with the creation of the Monroe Doctrine-inspired Inter-American system. The first step was the creation of the Inter-American defence board in 1942, followed by the Inter-American Treaty of the Reciprocal Assistance in 1947 and the transformation of the old Pan American Union into the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948.<sup>29</sup>

A National Security Council statement from March 1953 sets forth the objectives and courses of actions of US foreign policy towards Latin America. In accordance with its pursuit of regional hegemony it called for

hemispheric solidarity, orderly political and economic development, safeguarding of the hemisphere, including sea and air approaches, by individual and collective defense measures against external aggression, the reduction and elimination of the menace of

internal Communist or other anti-U.S. subversion and an adequate production in Latin America of, and access by the United States to, raw materials essential to U.S. security.<sup>30</sup>

As the Cold War international order unfolded, US foreign policymakers framed explanations of policy in terms of a dichotomy of Pro-American versus Anti-American positions that made little sense from a Latin American perspective. US marines had been landing on Caribbean beaches long before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917,<sup>31</sup> Cuban interventions being among the most prominent.

The US defined all challenges to its control of the region as anti-American, and thus constituting a national security threat. It gave unabashed support to a configuration of anti-communist governments headed by right-wing dictators, including the one that ousted an elected government and established a dictatorship in Cuba from 1952 to 1958. The Batista government gave close and consistent support to US Cold War objectives and was well received in Washington.<sup>32</sup>

The Batista's coup d'état of 1952 stimulated the emergence of new forces within Cuba, which sought to advance a political project that was moderate but was essentially opposed to the neocolonial model. This new generation broke with traditional Cuban political elites by trying to transform the relations of dependence on the US. Latin American social theorists and activists of the era of the Cuban revolutionary process (since the 1950s) defined the economic and political context of countries like Cuba, as a result of dependency. For example, Brazilian social scientist, Theotonio Dos Santos, wrote about what he called the structure of dependence. 'Dependence is a situation in which a certain group of countries have their economy conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy, to which the former is subject.'<sup>33</sup>

As suggested above, in the Cuban case before the 26th of July Movement<sup>34</sup> seized power in Cuba in January 1959, the US had long controlled the island nation 90 miles from its shores. The country was ruled by dictator, Fulgencio Batista, a close ally of the US, who, through repression and corruption, generated large-scale opposition throughout both the countryside and the cities. In 1958, the State Department urged Batista to turn control over to a caretaker government, to forestall the victory of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, and their growing guerrilla armies, who were on the verge of overthrowing the dictator. Batista rejected the pressure to flee. Subsequently, his US-backed armies and police were defeated, and the revolutionaries were victorious.

When the revolutionary government assumed office, it began to develop a series of policies to alleviate the worst features of Cuban poverty that were the consequence of dependent development. The revolutionary government invested in housing, schools and public works. Salaries were raised, electrical rates were cut and rents were reduced by half. On a visit to the US in April 1959, Fidel

Castro, who had proposed a large-scale assistance programme for the Western Hemisphere to the Eisenhower administration, was ignored by the president.

Returning from a hostile visit to Washington, Fidel Castro announced a redistributive programme of agrarian reform that generated opposition from conservative Cuban and American landowners. These policies involved transfers of land to the Cuban people from the huge estates owned by the wealthy. The Eisenhower administration responded by reducing the quantity of US purchases of Cuban sugar. Cuba then nationalised the industry.

Cuba signed trade agreements with the Soviet Union in February 1960. The Soviets agreed to exchange their oil for sugar no longer purchased by the US. When the US-owned oil refineries refused to refine the Soviet oil, the Cuban government nationalised them.

In July 1960, the US cut all sugar purchases. Over the next several months, the Cuban government nationalised US-owned corporations and banks on the island. Therefore, between the spring of 1960 and January 1961, US and Cuban economic ties came to a halt, and the island nation had established formal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Shortly before Eisenhower left office, the break was made symbolically complete with the US termination of formal diplomatic relations with Cuba in early January 1961.

Subsequently, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the launching of the Alliance for Progress, and the Cuban Missile Crisis were defended by Washington in terms of the geopolitical, economic and ideological explanations always used to justify US policy. The real reason for hostility to Cuba, going beyond these causes, was the revolutionary threat Cuba represented to US hegemony, not only in the Caribbean but also throughout the Western Hemisphere.

### **The Bay of Pigs Invasion**

As US/Cuban economic and diplomatic tensions were escalating, President Eisenhower made a decision that in the future would eventually lead the world to the brink of nuclear war. In March 1960, he ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to create a Cuban exile force that would invade the island and depose Fidel Castro. Even the State Department knew at that time that Fidel Castro enjoyed the support of the majority of Cubans.

In April 1961, the newly elected President Kennedy was presented with an invasion plan by the CIA. The agency claimed that the right-wing Cubans would be greeted as heroes when they landed at the Bay of Pigs. After the Castro regime was overthrown, all private assets would be returned, and a Batista-like government would be re-established.

The Bay of Pigs Invasion, 17–19 April 1961, was launched by 1,500 Cuban exiles. It was an immediate failure: close to 300 invaders were killed and the rest captured. No uprising against the revolutionary government occurred. Kennedy was criticised in the US for not providing sufficient air support to protect the invading army. The critics ignored the fact that the revolutionary government had the support of workers and peasants who would fight to defend it.

After the invasion attempt failed, President Kennedy warned of the danger of the ‘menace of external Communist intervention and domination in Cuba’. He declared the need to respond to communism, whether in Cuba or South Vietnam and in the face of the communist danger to the Western Hemisphere he reserved the right to intervene as needed. The lesson he drew from the Bay of Pigs was the need for escalated adventurism, not caution.

### **The Alliance for Progress: A ‘Non-Communist’ Path to Development**

I have called on all the people of the hemisphere to join in a new Alliance for Progress – Alianza para Progreso – a vast cooperative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and nobility of purpose, to satisfy the basic needs of the American people for homes, work and land, health and schools – techo, trabajo y tierra, salud y escuela ...

To achieve this goal political freedom must accompany material progress. Our Alliance for Progress is an alliance of free governments – and it must work to eliminate tyranny from a hemisphere in which it has no rightful place. Therefore let us express our special friendship to the people of Cuba and the Dominican Republic – and the hope they will soon rejoin the society of free men, uniting with us in our common effort.<sup>35</sup>

And one year later, Kennedy proclaimed that ‘Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.’<sup>36</sup>

The Kennedy administration initiated a policy of foreign assistance in Latin America to complement the US’ historic use of military force in the region. The president’s economic programme was announced in the aftermath of long-standing complaints from Latin American dictators and some elected leaders that the US had supported European recovery, the celebrated Marshall Plan of the 1940s, but ignored the Western Hemisphere. Most importantly, the Kennedy administration and anti-communist friends in the Hemisphere became increasingly concerned about the enthusiasm the Cuban revolution was generating in the region.

In the midst of what was presented to the public as the ‘threat of Communism’ in Latin America, Kennedy presented his ‘Alliance for Progress’ aid package to diplomats and congressmen on 3 March 1961, about 1 month before JFK authorised the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

The Alliance, the president promised, would provide public and private assistance equivalent to US\$20 billion to Latin American countries over a ten-year period. The plan projected annual growth rates in Latin America of 2.5 per cent and would lead to the alleviation of malnutrition, poor housing and health, single-crop economies and iniquitous landholding patterns, all campaigns underway in revolutionary Cuba.

Loans were contingent upon the recipient governments, and their political and economic elites, carrying out basic land reform, establishing progressive taxation, creating social welfare programmes and expanding citizenship and opportunities for political participation but not challenging the basic economic system dominating the Hemisphere.

However, the effect of the Alliance, even before Kennedy's death, was negative. Problems of poverty, declining growth rates, inflation, lower prices for export commodities, and the maintenance of autocratic and corrupt governments persisted. The reality of the Alliance and most other aid programmes was that they were predicated on stabilising those corrupt ruling classes that had been the source of underdevelopment in the first place.

The connections between the Alliance programme and the interests of US capital were clear. For example, a section of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1962 authorised the president to cut off aid to any nation which nationalised or placed 'excessive' taxes on US corporations or which terminated contacts with US firms. The act also emphasised monetary stability and the kinds of austerity programmes common to US and International Monetary Fund aid, requiring nations receiving aid to reduce public services and to maintain low wage rates to entice foreign investment. Further, Alliance funds were often to be used to serve the interests of foreign capital, for example, building roads, harbours and transportation facilities to speed up the movement of locally produced but foreign-owned goods to international markets. So despite references to geopolitical threats and proclamations of economic goals to help the people of the region, Kennedy was seeking to resist the kind of revolutionary changes that had been institutionalised in Cuba.

Finally, the symbolism of the Alliance proclamation by President Kennedy was designed to promote the idea that US resources, in collaboration with reformism in Latin America, would create societies that met the needs of the people and encouraged their political participation. The Alliance was presented as a response to Fidel Castro, a 'non-Communist manifesto' for development.

The record of poverty and military rule throughout the Hemisphere suggested that there was no correspondence between symbol and reality. Kennedy, in a moment of unusual frankness, was reported to have said that the US preferred liberal regimes in Latin America, but if they could not be maintained, it would

much prefer a right-wing dictatorship to a leftist regime. After Kennedy's death, Thomas Mann, Assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, in the Johnson administration, told reporters that US policy in the Western Hemisphere was not about economic development or democratisation but fighting communism and protecting US economic interests.

In reality, the frankness about the motivations behind US policy expressed by Kennedy after the Alliance speech and Thomas Mann after Kennedy's death clearly showed that the bottom line in terms of US policy remained support for international capital. The 'Castros of this world', the Kennedy administration believed (as has every administration since), had to be crushed at all costs. What remained significant over the next 60 years was that the Cuban revolution could not be defeated.

### The Missile Crisis

In the missile crisis, the Kennedys played their dangerous game skilfully. But all their skill would have been to no avail if in the end Khrushchev had preferred his prestige, as they preferred theirs, to the danger of a world war. In this respect, we are all indebted to Khrushchev.<sup>37</sup>

The period between the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion, the announcement of the Alliance of Progress economic assistance programme, and the Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the escalating hostilities. On the eve of the invasion, Fidel Castro declared Cuba a socialist state. The US pressured members of the OAS to diplomatically isolate and expel Cuba from the organisation. The CIA began campaigns to assassinate the Cuban leader, and President Kennedy initiated the complete economic blockade that exists until today. In addition, the Cuban government warned that the US was continuing to plan for another invasion.<sup>38</sup> Most scholars agree that there was a direct link between the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In October 1962, US spy planes sighted the construction of Soviet surface-to-air missile installations and the presence of Soviet medium-range bombers on Cuban soil. These sightings were made after Republican leaders had begun to attack Kennedy for allowing a Soviet military presence on the island. Kennedy had warned the Soviets in September not to install 'offensive' military capabilities in Cuba. Photographs indicated that the Soviets had also begun to build ground-to-ground missile installations on the island, which Kennedy defined as 'offensive' and a threat to national security.

After securing the photographs, Kennedy assembled a special team of advisors, known as Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), to

discuss various responses the US might make. He excluded any strategy that prioritised taking the issue to the United Nations for resolution.

After much deliberation, ExComm focused on two policy responses: a strategic air strike against Soviet targets in Cuba or a blockade of incoming Soviet ships coupled with threats of further action if the Soviet missiles were not withdrawn. Both options had a high probability of escalating to nuclear war, if the Soviet Union refused to back down.

High drama, much of it televised, followed the initiation of a naval blockade of Soviet ships heading across the Atlantic to Cuba. Fortunately, the leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, sent notes to the president that led to a tacit agreement between the two leaders, whereby Soviet missiles would be withdrawn from Cuba and the US would promise not to invade Cuba to overthrow the Castro government. In addition, the president indicated that obsolete US missiles in Turkey would be disassembled over time.

The Soviets withdrew their missiles. Analysts said that the Soviet Union suffered a propaganda defeat for putting the missiles on Cuban soil in the first place and then withdrawing them after US threats. Khrushchev was criticised by the Chinese government, and within a year, he was ousted from leadership in the Soviet Union.

In the light of this US ‘victory’, Kennedy has been defined as courageous and rational. The real meaning of the Cuban Missile Crisis, however, is different, even 50 years after the event. The crisis actually suggests that the US quest to maintain and enhance its empire would lead it to go to any extreme, even nuclear war, to defend the interests of capitalism. To avoid serious losses, whether symbolic or material, for capitalism, any policy was justified.

Further, in terms of US politics, Kennedy was calculating the effects of the missiles on the chances for his party to retain control of Congress in 1962. A second ‘defeat’ over Cuba (the Bay of Pigs was the first) would have heightened the opposition’s criticisms of his foreign policy.

In personal terms, Kennedy was driven by the need to establish a public image as courageous and powerful in confronting the Soviets. Khrushchev had spoken harshly to him at a summit meeting in Vienna in 1961, and Castro had been victorious at the Bay of Pigs. The president’s own ‘credibility’ had been damaged, and a show of force in October, 1962, was necessary for his career.

Because of imperialism, politics and personal political fortunes, the world almost went to nuclear war 50 years ago. As I.F. Stone suggested shortly after the crisis, nuclear war was avoided because the Soviet Union chose to withdraw from the tense conflict rather than to engage in it further.

National Security Archives files suggest that ‘the historical record shows that the decisions leading to the crisis which almost brought nuclear war have

been repeated over and over again since the early 1960s'.<sup>39</sup> The danger of the unabashed and irresponsible use of force and legitimating the idea that diplomacy can be conducted using nuclear weapons and other devastating weapon systems still represent a threat to human survival.

### **The Reality of US Policy towards Cuba: Traditional Scholarship and Alternative Perspectives**

Traditional commentary on the US/Cuban relationship is shaped by a variety of frames of reference reflected in explanations of the Bay of Pigs, the Alliance for Progress and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Pundits have emphasised *the ideology of manifest destiny*, American exceptionalism, the fear of communism and the growing influence of the former Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere as justified or unjustified causes of US policy towards Cuba. The emphasis in these approaches is on ideological presuppositions held by key decision-makers during critical periods of time. Commonly held explanations of why decision-makers acted the way they did emphasise either the idea that the US had a special role to play in the world and/or international communism was a threat to US security.

Still other theorists, not fundamentally in opposition to those above but largely reflecting *realist* theories of international relations, emphasise decision-maker calculations such as *the strategic balance of forces* between the former Soviet Union and the US. During the Missile Crisis, Kennedy advisers debated whether Soviet missiles on Cuban soil constituted a threat to the strategic balance between the US and the former Soviet Union.

Further, many commentators emphasise *domestic politics* as the key determinant of US policy towards Cuba. These theorists give special consideration to the passionate and well-organised right-wing Cuban American exile community (primarily in the swing state of Florida but also in New Jersey) as the primary force shaping US policy. More recently, advocates of this perspective would support an end to the US economic blockade of Cuba, arguing that US-desired change on the island would more likely be achieved by economic and political interaction between the two countries, rather than efforts to isolate the island.

Finally, some commentators see *human rights goals* as key guides to US policy towards Cuba. These analysts prioritise claims that Cuba is a dictatorship (a communist one), stifles economic competition, promotes destructive revolutionary ideologies at home and abroad and imprisons their citizens who criticise the regime. The traditional 'human rights' non-governmental organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International promote these critiques of Cuba and give fuel to policymakers who encourage continued isolation of the island.

In short, nationalisations, agrarian reform, expropriations of private property, Soviet trade delegations, weapons deliveries from the eastern bloc and Castro's vituperative and crowd-pleasing rhetoric all deeply alarmed national security managers in Cold War-era Washington. But at the height of the Cold War, a hardened and visceral anti-communism – supported by the clear antipathy of Eisenhower and later Kennedy towards Cuba's leaders – reigned supreme.<sup>40</sup>

However, more compelling analyses, we believe, highlight the idea that containing the Cuban example and the impact of Cuban active counter-hegemonic foreign policy, especially in Africa and Latin America, had been important for guiding US policy. As early as November 1959, the Eisenhower administration showed concern and recommended action to contain the Cuban example: 'the prolonged continuation of the Castro regime in Cuba in its present form would have serious adverse effects on the United States position in Latin America and corresponding advantages for international Communism'.<sup>41</sup> The well-known Baker Memorandum explained in 1989 that 'Cuba continues to engage in military adventurism abroad and to support subversive movements in the Western Hemisphere to the detriment of peace, stability, and democratic processes.'<sup>42</sup>

### **The Issue is US Imperialism and Cuba as an Alternative for the Global South**

Stephen Kinzer in *Overthrow* (Times Books, 2006) argued that the US had been engaging in efforts to undermine and overthrow independent governments around the world, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, ever since it took Hawaii in the 1890s. In fact, the Cuban revolution of 1898 against Spanish colonialism was usurped by US forces, followed by a full-scale occupation of the country, the institutionalisation of a protectorate until 1934 and then indirect economic and political domination, lasting until 1959.

As so many accounts of US/Cuban relations suggest, the interests of the Cuban people never figured into US policy towards the island. The economic blockade and diplomatic embargo of the island has amounted to a 50-year effort to strangle, not only the regime, but also the Cuban people. In effect, others must be forced to sacrifice for the US imperial agenda.

Consequently, as the Bay of Pigs fiasco suggests that US foreign policy decision-makers almost always misjudged the will of the people who would be subjected to military action. Ruling classes, by their very nature, are unable to understand the interests, passions and visions of the great masses of people. The director of the CIA and other members of the president's inner circle were incapable of understanding that the Cuban people supported their revolution, so they ignored State Department polling data.

The end of 2014 brought a change in US Cuba policy as an agreement was announced by Presidents Obama and Castro on 17th December. The US agreed to restore diplomatic relations and start a process of normalisation of relations with Cuba. While recognising the Cuban government means of abandoning military or covert strategies of regime change and steering away from confrontational approaches, the new US approach does not mean that the hemispheric hegemon no longer seeks to stifle revolutionary change. The new policy, while welcome in Cuba and in the region, represents a change of tactics not strategy.

Recent policies towards Venezuela; interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine; and the so-called Asian pivot all suggest that the US continues to pursue global hegemony. Any challenge to that hegemony, such as the Cuban Revolution, is defined as a security issue. In fact, nations and people who seek their independence as reflected in the idea of revolution referred to at the outset of this article constitute a threat that must be undermined.

The sorry record of US policy towards Cuba is an example of this approach, and the US continues to make these mistakes. Even though the variety of variables highlighted by scholars and pundits to understand US policy towards Cuba tells part of the story, the underlying US perception of threat coupled with its hostility to the spread of revolutionary regimes are what shape the ideological justifications, geopolitical concerns and domestic political pressures influencing policy-making.

## Notes

1. The Moncada Programme became the platform of the movement 26th of July (M-26-7) that is named after the military garrison that was attacked on 26 July 1953 by a group led by Fidel Castro. The Programme, which became basically the platform of the new government, was profoundly nationalistic. The 1940 Constitution was reinstated and amended, the telephone company was nationalised as early as March 1959 and on 17 May 1959, the Agrarian Reform Law was enacted. For an excellent compilation of the text of the new laws and their impact, see José Bell Lara, Tania Caram and Delia Luisa López, *Documentos de la Revolución Cubana 1959* (La Habana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 2008).
2. Samuel Farber, *Cuba since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), p. 96.
3. Jefferson to Madison, 27 April 1809 quoted in D.S. Whittlesey, 'Geographic Factors in the Relations of the United States and Cuba', *Geographical Review* 12 (2) April 1922: 241–56.
4. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9.
5. John Quincy Adams to Hugh Nelson, April 28, 1823, in Worthington C. Ford, ed., *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7 vols. (New York, 1913–17), 7: 372–9.

6. The full quote appears in Louis Pérez Jr, *Cuba between Empires 1878–1902* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), p. 57. Other authors have later rephrased references to it. See Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 70; Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 69.
7. Louis Pérez Jr, *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 7.
8. During the 1840s, the idea of purchasing Cuba with the consent of Cuban annexationists gained momentum. John O'Sullivan an American columnist, who coined the phrase Manifest Destiny, visited Cuba in 1847. Upon his return, he campaigned strongly in favour of purchasing Cuba. He appealed to Secretary of State James Buchanan, expansionist Senator Stephen Douglas and President Polk himself. It was President Polk who offered 100 million to Spain on 30 May 1848. There were other attempts to purchase Cuba, most notable during the Franklin Pierce administration. These efforts were spearheaded by Jefferson Davis, then secretary of war and future president of the Confederacy after the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861. Michael E. Byrnes, *James K Polk: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Biographical Companion, 2001), pp. 47–8.
9. Three American diplomats Pierre Soule, James Mason and James Buchanan – US ambassadors to France, Spain and Great Britain – and all pro-slavery democrats held a meeting in Ostend, Belgium, on 9–11 October 1854, where they drew up a manifesto. For a good study of the context, see Sidney Webster, 'Mr. Marcy, the Cuban Question and the Ostend Manifesto', *Political Science Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (March 1893): 1–32. The actual document can be found at *House Executive Documents* 33 Cong., 2 Sess., vol. X, pp. 127–36.
10. Richard B. Kimball, *Cuba, and the Cubans: Comprising a History of the Island of Cuba, Its Present Social, Political, and Domestic Condition: Also, Its Relation to England and the United States* (New York: S. Hueston, 1850).
11. Alexander Jones, *Cuba in 1851: Containing Authentic Statistics of the Population Agriculture and Commerce of the Island for a Series of Years with Official and Other Documents in Relation to the Revolutionary Movements of 1850 and 1851* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1851).
12. David Saville Muzzey, *James Blaine: A Political Idol of Other Days* (New York, 1935). Quoted in Walter Lafeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).
13. Jules R. Benjamin, 'The Origins of Hegemony 1880–1902', in Jules R. Benjamin (ed.) *The United States and Cuba: Hegemony and Dependent Development, 1880–1934* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), pp. 3–12.
14. Francisco Figueras, *Cuba y su Evolución Colonial* (La Habana: Imprenta Avisador Comercial, 1907), p. 167.
15. Louis Perez Jr, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 56.
16. Julio Le Riverend, *Historia Económica de Cuba* (La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1974), p. 509.

17. Jules Benjamin, *United States and Cuba: Hegemony and Dependent Development* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), pp. 3–12.
18. See, for example, Christopher A. Vaughan, ‘Cartoon Cuba: Race, Gender and Political Opinion Leadership in Judge 1898’, *African Journalism Studies* 24, no. 2 (2003): 195–217; Louis A. Pérez Jr, ‘Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy toward Cuba’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002): 227–54; Louis A. Pérez Jr, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Lars Schoultz, ‘Blessings of Liberty: The United States and the Promotion of Democracy in Cuba’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002): 397–425.
19. Greg Jones, *Honor in the Dust: Theodore Roosevelt, War in the Philippines, and the Rise and Fall of America’s Imperial Dream* (New York: New American Library, 2012), p. 93.
20. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 73.
21. Lars Schoultz, *The United States and the Cuban Revolution: That Infernal Little Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 24.
22. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9.
23. Theodore Roosevelt, ‘Annual Message to Congress’, 6 December 1904, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws? pid=29545](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws?pid=29545). (Accessed 16 April 2015.)
24. Ibid.
25. The Colonial Policy of the United States, ‘An Address Delivered at Christiania, Norway, May 5, 1910’, in *African and European Addresses* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), p. 89.
26. Theodore Roosevelt, ‘“*The Expansion of the White Races*’, Address at the celebration of the African Diamond Jubilee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., January 18, 1909’, in *American Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926).
27. This was the second occupation of Cuba by US marines. It started on 28 September 1906 as Marines landed in Cuba after a political crisis. This time the occupation lasted 3 years under Charles Magoon, former governor of the Panama Canal Zone. David A. Lockmiller, *Magoon in Cuba: A History of the Second Intervention, 1906–1909* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938); Allen R. Millet, *The Politics of Intervention: The Military Occupation of Cuba, 1906–1909* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), p. 267.
28. Lars Schoultz, *The United States and the Cuban Revolution: That Infernal Little Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 33.
29. Gordon Connel-Smith, *The Inter-American System* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 190–8. For a critical perspective on the role of the US in the construction of the Inter-American system, see Humberto Vázquez García, *De Chapultepec a la OEA, apogeo y crisis del panamericanismo* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2001); Luis Suarez Salazar and Tania García Lorenzo, *Las Relaciones Interamericanas: continuidad y cambio* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2008), Capítulo 6, p. 89.

30. United States Objectives and Courses of Action With Respect to Latin America, Statement of Policy by the National Security Council, Washington, March 18, 1953. Top Secret NSC 144/1 S/S–NSC files, lot 63 D 351, NSC 144 series.
31. Max Paul Friedman, *Rethinking Anti-Americanism: The History of an Exceptional Concept in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 123.
32. Morris Morley, 'The U.S. Imperial State in Cuba 1952–1958: Policy Making and Capitalist Interests', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 14 (1) May 1982: 143–70.
33. Theotonio Dos Santos, 'The Structure of Dependence', *American Economic Review* 60 (2), Papers and proceedings of the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association, May 1970, pp. 231–6.
34. The movement that emerged from the Moncada Barracks's attack took the name of 26th of July and was made up of the most radical elements of the orthodox youth without any commitment to the political past who saw armed struggle as the only option. The creation of a 'movement' instead of a 'party' reveals the disillusion and disgust with tradition politics in Cuba. The formation of the Rebel Army later on became its most important contribution to the revolutionary process. The international position of the movement was declared in its 1955 manifesto.

With regard to the specific matter of the relations between Cuba and the United States, the 26th of July Movement formulates a doctrine of constructive friendship. By this we mean mutual respect, particularly in the economic and cultural areas. Fortunately, such a situation can be overcome without damage to any legitimate interest. Through constructive friendship, Cuba can truly become, as is indicated by a multitude of geographical, economic, and even political factors, a loyal ally of the great country to the north, yet at the same time preserve its ability to control its own destiny. Through new and just agreements, without unnecessary sacrifices or humiliating sellouts, it can multiply the advantages that are derived from our neighborhood. (Manifiesto del Movimiento 26 de Julio, 8 de Agosto de 1955, Dirección Política de las FAR. De Tuxpan a la Plata. Editorial Orbe, La Habana, 1979, pp. 129–34)

35. John F. Kennedy, 'Preliminary Formulations of the Alliance for Progress', 13 March 1961, *Department of State Bulletin* XLIV, no. 1136 (3 April 1961): 471–4.
36. John F. Kennedy, 'Address on the First Anniversary of the Alliance for Progress', 13 March 1962, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9100>. (Accessed 16 April 2015.)
37. I.F. Stone, 'What if Khrushchev Hadn't Backed Down?', in I.F. Stone (ed.) *In a Time of Torment* (New York: Vintage, 1967).
38. Operation Mongoose started to be organised in late 1961, just 6 months after the events at Bay of Pigs; it was a comprehensive plan to create the conditions for a second invasion of Cuba and the ultimate removal of the Cuban. Rubén G. Jiménez Gómez, *Octubre de 1962: la mayor crisis de la era nuclear* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2003); Tomás Díez Acosta, *Octubre de 1962: a un paso del holocausto: una mirada cubana a la Crisis de los Misiles* (La Habana: Editora Política, 2008).
39. National Security Archives, [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/). (Accessed 16 April 2015.)
40. These variables are discussed in depth in Julia E. Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 77–8.

41. Memorandum from the Secretary of State to the President, Washington, November 5, 1959, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume VI, Cuba, Document 387, Department of State, Central Files, 611.37/11–559. Secret, No drafting or clearance information is given on the source text, also published in *Declassified Documents, 1981*, 356C.
42. Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Unfinished Business: America and Cuba after the Cold War, 1989–2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 17.