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**Dustin Walcher. "Petroleum Pitfalls: The United States, Argentine Nationalism, and the 1963 Oil Crisis." *Diplomatic History* 37:1 (January 2013): 24-57. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dhs002.**

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Dustin Walcher's fine essay, "Petroleum Pitfalls: The United States, Argentine Nationalism, and the 1963 Oil Crisis," explores what might be considered an exceptional story in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War. In Walcher's recounting of U.S. efforts to stop Argentina's cancellation of foreign oil contracts, concerns about the spread of communism are essentially absent. This is important because, as Walcher accurately notes, much of the recent historiography on U.S.-Latin American relations in the postwar era uses a Cold War/anti-Communist lens to frame Washington's regional policy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in this case, it is hard to argue that U.S. policymakers were responding to a political threat.

Given that Walcher's evidence is strong enough to prove his contentions that a group of U.S. officials cared deeply about the nationalization, there are a limited number of interpretive possibilities. It is possible that this case is simply an aberration; that the

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1. Walcher cites as examples Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, 1992); and Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York, 2007). Walcher's citing two of Stephen Rabe's books is not surprising because Rabe is the most prolific and perhaps the most influential historian of U.S.-Latin American relations during the past two decades, and the thesis about the primacy of anticommunism is central to his work. He could have easily added Rabe's more recent survey, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York, 2011) or his 2009 work, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill, 2009). Other representative samples could include Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Bradley Coleman, *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939-1960* (Kent, OH, 2008); and Don Bohning, *The Castro Obsession: U.S. Covert Operations against Cuba, 1959-1965*. (Washington, D.C., 2005).

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dynamics of Argentine-U.S. relations were fundamentally unique and that this case does not speak to any grander policy trend. Unsurprisingly, Walcher does not make this argument, though I will address its merits below. The second potential explanation is more tantalizing in that it suggests limits to the extant historiography. Walcher argues that scholars can use this case to better appreciate how economic considerations worked in concert with political ones to drive U.S. policy in Latin America during the Cold War.

Assuming that U.S. officials intertwined political concerns in Latin America with a desire to protect U.S. businesses, as Walcher does, allows for a recasting of the periodization of inter-American relations in the twentieth century. The Cold War becomes less a fight about stopping the spread of communism, and more about the continued extension of U.S. regional power. Using this perspective, the Cold War appears as just the second phase of a movement dating back to at least the 1890s. While nailing down this grand thesis is a bit much for one essay, Walcher's work presents an important case study that can be used to explain why the United States cared about situations that had little or no impact on the geopolitical balance of power.

Overall, the essay is a solid piece of well-crafted scholarship. Perhaps most notably, Walcher is able to explain how and why Argentine leaders moved to cancel foreign oil contracts. His command of the Argentine narrative, demonstrated through his ability to trace role of oil in the flowering of economic populism, is quite impressive. In a vital section of the essay, he explains that opposition to foreign involvement in the oil industry was at the core of the middle-class Radical Party's nationalist platform, and thus a top priority for Arturo Illia, the party's victorious standard-bearer in the 1963 Argentine presidential elections. Therefore, although U.S. policymakers, most notably U.S. Ambassador in Buenos Aires, Robert McClintock, expended a great deal of energy on trying to convince Illia to rescind his decree, that effort had absolutely no chance of succeeding. This is important because it meant that U.S. policymakers would ultimately become frustrated with Illia, which in turn, would damage bilateral relations.

In looking at these frustrations, Walcher highlights congressional efforts in 1963 to modify the Hickenlooper amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1962 over the objections of Kennedy administration officials and oil company executives. The initial 1962 amendment was a response to Fidel Castro's expropriations of U.S. property in Cuba. Its intent was to automatically block the president from offering aid to nations that nationalized property owned by U.S. citizens. Following the Argentine action, Senator Bourke Hickenlooper (R-IA) attempted to strengthen his amendment's language for the 1963 Foreign Assistance Act to include any government that attempted to cancel extant contracts with U.S. citizens or U.S.-based corporations. These congressional efforts sowed anger on both sides. This line of argument is significant because it presents a clear case of Congress inserting itself into presidential prerogatives in Latin America. Walcher likely could have emphasized the analytical importance of this issue a bit more, but in an essay that already aims fairly high, historiographically speaking, it is understandable that he does not make more of this element.

Walcher also suggests that the course of U.S.-Argentine relations reinforces a larger case about the breakdown of the idealism inherent in Alliance for Progress, Kennedy's massive multi-lateral aid program for Latin America, by 1963. It is appropriate to ask just how representative this crisis is to the broader historical narrative. Walcher notes that Argentine officials were not enthusiastic about the Alliance for Progress, and he could have explained that in both relative and absolute terms Argentina was not a high priority for U.S. officials who were involved in regional aid spending. This consideration is important because it suggests that it might not be entirely meaningful to explore U.S.-Argentine relations as a way of drawing conclusions about larger U.S. hemispheric relationships in the early 1960s. Unlike countries that consistently received promises of large aid packages, in Argentina the Kennedy administration had significantly less leverage. Illia did not have to worry as much as his neighbors did about challenging the United States government because he had far less to lose. He did not seem to view the United States as a partner in his nation's development, and as Walcher demonstrates, he was not particularly concerned about angering Kennedy administration officials. Thus, while Walcher steers clear of the possibility that U.S.-Argentine relations were exceptional, and wants to use this case to draw conclusions about U.S.-Latin American relations as a whole, it is not hard to see a measure of exceptionalism in the narrative.

A second argument Walcher makes about this case in a regional context probably could have benefitted from more sustained attention. In the early parts of the essay Walcher suggests a number of times that U.S. officials feared that Argentina's action might inspire Venezuela's and Peru's leaders to move against U.S. oil companies in their own countries. As Walcher points out, Argentina had a fairly small oil industry and its economic impact on the United States was negligible, but oil exports from Venezuela were vitally important. While some U.S. policymakers clearly did make this connection, a quick survey of the footnotes raises the question about how vital a role it played in the development of a U.S. response, and Walcher seems to let this argument drop as the essay progresses.

Walcher's work on other avenues, however, yields better answers. Part of the essay attempts to track contacts between oil company officials and U.S. policymakers. Walcher notes that there was significant collaboration between these two groups, and that the oil industry executives generally opposed expansion of the Hickenlooper amendment to avoid antagonizing other oil producing nations. Though it may do a disservice to the complexity that Walcher presents, it does seem that U.S. policymakers were angrier than company officials, and at a minimum, that U.S. efforts to defend corporate property did not primarily come from corporate prodding. If this is the case, it raises the question as to why U.S. officials cared so much. Here, it did not seem to be concrete economic concerns that drove U.S. policy, but a different kind of touchy imperialism that was oversensitive to nationalist emotion.

Indeed, Walcher emphasizes the role that emotional responses had through the essay. He notes that U.S. officials saw Argentine policy as being driven by emotion, and he argues

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that they classified economic nationalism as a kind of irrational hysteria. This allowed U.S. officials to judge Argentines as being not entirely modern and to rationalize their own efforts by believing that they were acting logically and responsibly. However, throughout the situation, it was U.S. officials that responded overly emotionally. Though Walcher calls this the 1963 Oil Crisis, it was only a crisis from the U.S. perspective. For the Argentines it was not a crisis, but rather a moment of national pride and dignity.

This point is clear in the vignette that opens the essay. Walcher explains that on the night of November 16, 1973, Ambassador McClintock drove through the rain to confront President Illia. Walcher writes that McClintock “arrived scarlet-faced, refused to shake Illia’s hand, and in a raised voice warned” the President about “the dire consequences that were sure to befall Argentina.” Illia responded calmly, wondering aloud why McClintock was so angry, and responded that his government had acted legally and fairly. Here might be the strongest argument about why this case speaks to the larger historiography of U.S. relations with Latin America. It was neither communism nor crass economic considerations that drove U.S. policy. Instead, both kinds of policies emerged from concerns about control and power. Argentina was problematic because its leaders embraced economic nationalism, and in so doing rejected a larger framework and history of the United States’ regional hegemony.

Walcher demonstrates that accusations about emotionalism tended to reveal more about the accuser than the accused. U.S. policymakers seemed to approach Argentina as a typical Latin American country. They expected to dominate the political landscape and failed to appreciate that their ‘rational’ capitalist concerns were not rational in a local nationalistic context. This is not a unique situation. The kinds of ideas that conditioned U.S. responses to Illia’s decree were pervasive throughout the twentieth century among U.S. officials. What makes Argentina interesting is that the United States appears to have had far less influence there than anywhere else. This is what allows Walcher to pursue his larger point about how the Cold War, or rather the absence of the Cold War, marked this crisis. The issues at stake in the larger struggle, to a large extent, were not relevant; their symbolism was. This is a case study in how the United States managed its hemispheric empire, and it demonstrates that there was little in the management of this situation that was connected to a geopolitical threat.

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