

The Contradictions of American Policy: From “Freebooter” to “Freedom Fighters” to Filibusters

Project Proposal

Introduction

Why does the United States often operate on a double standard?

Although built around the principles of democracy and national integrity, the U.S. government has persistently pursued tactics to circumvent its own highest ideals, finding methods to expand into established territory, to intervene in foreign countries, and now most recently, to manipulate the process of voting on bills in Congress. This contradiction between voiced principles and actual behavior is both alarming and enlightening, offering insight into a nation not as disciplined and democratic as traditionally perceived.

The term filibuster originated in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of American attempts to exercise its power and ideals in Central America, forcing inhabitants of the region into the United States’ sphere of influence. In this initial context, filibuster connoted the “freebooters” or soldiers of fortune who attempted to overthrow the governments of these weaker and newly independent states, even while proclaiming themselves to be harbingers of “democracy” and self-determination. Today and throughout the mid-nineteenth century, however, use of the word “filibuster” is typically reserved for protracted debates in the senate that can derail the deliberation process and interfere with the passage of a bill. Both occurrences illustrate the ease with which American principles have fallen subject to selfish attempts at modifying policy and circumventing a process of discussion that would substantiate democracy’s ideals. I will minimize the vast distance in time between these two events by relating an intermediary event, the Bay of Pigs incident and other covert actions in Cuba sanctioned by U.S. governmental leaders. Although these three major illustrations of an inconsistency between rhetoric and action in U.S. policy were carried out by various actors, including wealthy militiamen, governmental officials, and senate leaders, the common theme of a United States polity that subverts its own principles in pursuit of dubious goals resonates within each.

Over the course of my first two years at UConn, primarily through the courses I have taken in the field of political science, I have gathered a strong interest in the conduct of American foreign relations, and in particular the evolution of U.S. relations with Latin America since the early nineteenth century. I have discerned a particular pattern in the diplomatic tactics of American leaders toward this region and their often easy subversion of principled action when pursuing expansionist policies. Through this

project I propose to connect three major segments of America decision-making that illustrate this persistent theme of incongruity between American doctrine and action. I will research the motives behind and consequences of a growing expansionist America that swelled in the nineteenth century. I will focus on Cuba and the period between 1848-1860 which marked an unabashed pursuit of territory and power in Central America by American filibusters, concentrating on this inherent perversion of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine which had warned European nations against interference in Latin America. Additionally, I will connect these earliest contradictions to the mid- to late-twentieth century relations with Cuba in which U.S. leaders continued to undermine American values and international legal standards. During this period, the Kennedy administration used the undefined threat of communist subversion as a justification for aiding Cuban nationals attempting to overthrow a government under Fidel Castro's leadership. Finally, to align this historical analysis with contemporary domestic politics, I will address the degree to which filibusters are used in Congress today to stretch the law and interfere with democratic debate.

Such a University Scholar project will serve as an invaluable way to search for the underlying causes and consequences of this routine alteration of America's proclaimed objectives and standards to accommodate goals as they arise. Conducting research on this issue will provide the opportunity to link these events and issues that may at first appear disparate, but which ultimately reflect the fissures in American conduct and creed. This problem is of such interest to me because throughout these seemingly distant time periods, the substantial discrepancy between word and action, rhetoric and behavior, is glaring. Studying this topic will provide me with a deeper understanding both of past and present U.S. politics and will help to explain why the United States has subtly defied its own standards to justify these three key dismissals of American principles.

After completing my degree at UConn, I hope to pursue graduate training in a program that emphasizes both diplomatic history and contemporary international relations. The likelihood of the official resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba under the Obama administration makes the study of Cuban-American relations even more central as our world is bound to change profoundly over the next four years. I plan to use the knowledge obtained through this project throughout my graduate studies to aid in a broader understanding of foreign policy, national motives, and comparative politics. I will assemble a thesis paper and upon the completion of my research, deliver a presentation of my findings and conclusions.

Review of the Literature

Although the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 admonished foreign powers to refrain from intervention in the Western hemisphere, it also implied America's belief that it had an indelible and natural right to protect and dominate this territory. Although Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, a primary drafter of the Monroe Doctrine, outlined American principles of "reciprocity, . . . equal liberty, and equal justice" in an 1821 speech, subsequent actions showed the weak manner in which the United States upheld these values. In contrast to his adamant assertion that America has "without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations . . . and abstained from interference," (Merrill, vol. 1, 133) this commitment to nonintervention quickly fragmented as Manifest Destiny propelled America toward an expansionist campaign first in the West and shortly after in Central America in the 1850s. Despite Adams' assertion that "America's glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*," this principle dissipated amidst attempts to extend American boundaries and power. Leaders professed one set of ideals and held other nations to those standards, yet simultaneously evaded these guidelines in their own actions. I will concentrate on filibuster Narcisco Lopez, his incursions into Cuba in 1849 and 1951, and his efforts to "civilize" natives as an extension of the undemocratic expansionist principles American leaders from John Tyler to James K. Polk promoted in this era as well. Although United States leaders did not direct or condone these filibustering attempts, their occurrence exhibited the overwhelming degree to which these interventions had become a persistent expression of American power as well as a component of the larger-scale executive-directed interventions and expansion into inhabited territory in the mid-nineteenth century. Ambitions superseded principles as leaders failed to adhere to the same ideals they projected on the rest of the world.

Into the twentieth century, America continued to evade its own policy prescriptions, but shifted its focus away from territorial acquisition. The United States defiantly pursued its own objectives while rejecting standards of restraint in a use of force that jeopardized justice and open contracts. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy inherited plans for a CIA-led operation to train and aid Cuban exiles in overthrowing their government. Despite the administration's proclaimed commitment to all nations' autonomy, concerns over left-wing dictators and the concurrent Cold War struggle to defeat communism provoked JFK and his closest cabinet officials to intervene covertly in overthrowing Fidel Castro. Kennedy, as well as presidents before and after him, posited the domino theory's relevance in Cuba where communist revolution would likely follow if other nations in Europe and Asia fell to communist control as well. Although traditionally thought of as exemplifying the American commitment to justice,

democratic decision-making, and national sovereignty, President Kennedy sidestepped the law's boundaries and the separation-of-powers restraint within the U.S. government. "Secret operations in a democracy are a paradox, all the more so if those operations intervene in the politics of another country," yet Kennedy continued to interfere in Cuba (Treverton, 3). While the United States projected its own ideals on Cuba and proclaimed a commitment to securing "democratic" nations in Latin America, the president and his advisors sanctioned the Bay of Pigs invasion without consulting Congress or informing the American public of their plans. Instead of validating American actions as congruent with basic democratic tenets and international standards, Kennedy's actions illustrated the degree to which the United States had used its authority to disregard restraint.

This cynical rejection of principle also relates to the current situation in Congress where filibusters are used to circumvent the principle of an unpressured vote wherein senators can express both their views and the interests of their constituents. Filibustering jeopardizes the democratic process and principles of American representative government by manipulating debate and facilitating senators' attempts at coercing their colleagues. In Politics or Principle? Filibustering in the United States Senate, authors Binder and Smith emphasize the avenues through which filibustering can stifle democratic debate, a key component of the American political system that has traditionally been able to prevent minority or majority party domination. The original goal of filibustering was to prevent minorities from the "tyranny of the majority" that could hijack policy in its favor. More recently, however, senate debate has turned toward the other extreme as filibustering has facilitated efforts of individual senators to pursue purely political interests and personal gain (Binder, 4). The filibuster can thus be analyzed on equal ground with the nineteenth and twentieth century incursions into foreign territory, for all three represent an American system that professes certain principles, but routinely denies its commitment to these doctrines in action.

Methods

In commencing this project, I will draw on the knowledge acquired through the relevant classes in political science that originally prompted my interests in this subject. I have already taken two courses that will be particularly helpful in beginning my research, including Latin American Politics (POLS 237) and Recent American Diplomacy (POLS 217) which together offer insight into the historical relationships and development of foreign policy between the United States and Latin American nations. I am also currently taking American Diplomacy (POLS 215), which explores U.S.

foreign relations from the nation's founding to 1920 and will be particularly helpful in beginning research on the filibustering of the mid-nineteenth century.

To broaden my knowledge of and familiarity with this subject area I will consult historical texts and contemporary analyses in discerning the parallel and opposing motives, external factors, and consequences of these eras. Both volumes of the text A History in American Foreign Relations compile primary source documents, including speeches and historical addresses, doctrines, treaties, and presidential correspondences that provide an intimate analysis of the thoughts and discussions shaping American policy positions in these critical years of U.S. growth. These sources will function as a vital aid to developing familiarity with the personalities that shaped policy throughout these periods in American development. Additionally, this source also includes contemporary scholars' interpretations of these papers which will aid in noting all sides of the argument before I formulate my own understanding of these documents.

Aside from newspapers, journals, and other published sources, I intend to add another dimension to my research by examining the auditory records of Kennedy's presidency. The Kennedy Library in Boston contains documents, tape recordings, and other valuable resources that will aid in researching the Bar of Pigs affair. This medium of research materials adds an innovative aspect to this University Scholar Project as the vast majority of analyses of the Kennedy administration have been published before these recordings were made available to the public. Since few scholars have published interpretations of these recently released files, I can look directly at Kennedy's thoughts, reasoning, and objectives to develop my own conclusion of and possibly offer new perspectives on the Bay of Pigs incident. Professor J. Garry Clifford also has photocopies of documents regarding this event in the Kennedy administration that would supply additional valuable information. Thomas G. Paterson, the co-author of several of the textbooks I will draw from in my research, retired as a professor in the History Department at UConn ten years ago and gave his research papers, largely on Cuban-American relations in the 1950s and 1960s, to the university upon his retirement. The Dodd Research Center houses his papers which I will investigate extensively as part of my research.

This past summer I had the opportunity of working in U.S. Representative John Larson's office and developing a more comprehensive understanding of the legislative process while writing grant proposals and attending forums. I intend to return to his office during the winter intercession as well as in the summer of 2009 and will discuss with Rep. Larson his views of Senate filibustering and perception of its effectiveness or negative influence on sustained and productive debate. UConn

political science Professors Jeffrey Ladewig and Vin Moscardelli, both experts on Congress, will also be consulted. They will steer me toward the sources and scholarship on Senate filibusters.

To assemble this data in a meaningful way, I will use the Structured Focused Comparison method developed by political scientists Alexander George and Andrew Bennett. This methodology will require that I focus on specific questions reflective of my research objectives and ask these questions in each of the three cases. By following this method of research and writing for the final thesis, I will draw comparisons between the cases rather than portray a singular historical analysis that is more descriptive than comparative.

Plan of Study

Proposed Schedule of Classes

Spring 2009

POLS 2998 Puerto Rican Politics and Culture
ECON 2456 Economic of Poverty
ECON 3421 International Trade
HIST 3705 Modern Middle East from 1700-Present
ENGL 3809WH English Literature
POLS 3206 Comparative Political Economy
POLS 3208W Politics of Oil

Fall 2009

ECON 3422 International Finance
ECON 3439W Urban and Regional Economics
ECON 3460 Economies of the Law
POLS 3604 Congress in Theory and Practice
POLS 5305 Foreign Policy Analysis
POLS 4994 Senior Seminar

Summer 2009

STAT 110QC

Spring 2010

ECON 3441 Theory of Labor Markets
POLS 3021 Modern Political Theory
POLS 5320 International Conflict and Cooperation
POLS 3447 American Diplomacy in the Middle East
POLS 4997 Senior Thesis
ECON 3428W Contemporary Problems in Economics

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the three main cases of this University Scholar Project, I intend to take courses in political science that focus in these areas. Although I have almost completed the requirements for a major in political science, I just recently declared second a major in economics, and thus need to take the necessary courses to complete this portion of my plan of study. In addition to these economics classes, I propose to enroll in Congress in Theory and Practice which focuses on elections, policy formation process, and law making. I believe this class will prove essential to this project by offering insight into the filibustering process in the U.S. Senate. If accepted into the University Scholar Program, I intend to enroll in two graduate courses that I feel will supplement the research I conduct by analyzing relevant literature. I believe Foreign Policy Analysis will aid in understanding the diplomatic actions taken by leaders that both aided in mending and exacerbated tensions between nations. I believe this may present additional information on U.S.-Cuban

interactions that have shaped the relationship between these two powers over the past two centuries. Through International Conflict and Cooperation I hope to gather a more in-depth understanding of the international disputes as well as efforts (or lack thereof) to improve diplomatic relations. These courses in particular will expose me to a valuable type of learning atmosphere as well as the potential to discuss with political science graduate students certain aspects of my project that they may also have an interest in.

References

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15. Vandebroucke, Lucien S. "Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs." Political Science Quarterly 99 (1984): 471-91. JSTOR.
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