



How Getting History Right Can Improve Relations between America and the Global South

James Lockhart, The University of Texas at El Paso

When President Barack Obama visited Chile six years ago, President Sebastián Piñera asked him to declassify new information relating to General Augusto Pinochet's human-rights violations in the 1970s, which Chilean authorities continue to investigate today. Voices from the Chilean left also demanded that Obama apologize for US support for the September 1973 coup that had enabled Pinochet to overthrow President Salvador Allende.

This exchange illustrates the kinds of problems that have long complicated the relationship between the United States and Latin America and much of the rest of the Global South. This instance reveals a US-centered perception of world affairs that tends to ignore developing nations' sovereignty and influence. It also shows how a series of well-known narratives of high-profile events like the Chilean coup still define the history of American foreign relations for many citizens of the United States and in developing nations. Indeed, some have reduced US-Latin American relations during the Cold War to a list of CIA interventions -- for example, in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Chile, and Nicaragua. For American foreign policy, this fosters a toxic atmosphere in which the United States is often cast as an arrogant, resource-hungry empire at war with international law, human rights, and even democracy itself.

During his visit to Chile, President Obama agreed to look into releasing more US documents. But he declined to apologize for the 1973 coup, explaining that he could not speak for past administrations. He urged Chileans to keep in mind that "It is important for us to learn from our history, to understand our history, but not be trapped by it." Obama's response represents an excellent strategy for policymakers, scholars, and journalists. As he suggested, the first step is to understand our history -- that is, get it right -- to set the stage for freeing ourselves from the mistakes of the past and then moving forward into a better future.

Getting History Right about United States-Global South Relations

Getting history right simply means that we should insist on decentered and factually-correct histories of the relations between the United States and the countries of the Global South -- rather than rely on narratives driven by US-centered worldviews and allegations. This requires us to reevaluate received assumptions about the United States' impact on world affairs. At the same time, scholars should familiarize themselves with developing nations' politics and history and explore relationships among countries within the Global South as well. There remains more to know about the world than our inherited stories of northern imperialism and southern victimization can tell us.

The United States has yet to declassify all pertinent documents on the Cold War. But American records alone, no matter what secrets they still contain, cannot explain the histories of Latin America and the rest of the

Global South. My forthcoming book, *Chile, the CIA, and the Cold War: A Transatlantic Perspective* begins from these new assumptions. It reevaluates Chilean history within the context of the Atlantic world, revealing a dynamic, interactive, and untold history of the Cold War in southern South America.

A Transatlantic Perspective on Chile, the CIA, and the Cold War

My key findings show that Chileans, not Wall Street or Washington DC, made their own history. These findings challenge the longstanding narrative centered on the Nixon and Allende administrations of the early 1970s:

- Chilean history does not fit within an exclusive, US-centered, inter-American framework. It cannot be well understood without recognizing the history of Chilean foreign relations and intra-Latin American conflict within a transatlantic context from the 1830s forward.
- Chilean communists and anticommunists emerged as an expression of Chilean politics in the era of the Industrial Revolution. Each side established friendly relations with Britain, France, Germany, the US, and the Soviet Union and then attempted to draw some of these powers into Chilean affairs. Before the Cuban Revolution, Chileans largely failed to draw these outside allies in, but they succeeded thereafter.
- Chileans and other South Americans contributed to the origins of the global Cold War in the late 1940s.
- From the late 1940s, fierce disputes between Chilean communists and anticommunists propelled the increasingly virulent fighting that ultimately destabilized Chile in the 1960s and 1970s.
- US Presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon certainly did intervene in Chile. These interventions were designed to preempt Cuban influence in Latin America, to support the establishment of a Christian Democratic government, to deny power to the far left, and to prevent the Allende administration from consolidating power. They clearly helped provoke the coup that overthrew Allende. But these interventions did not represent a well-planned campaign to mastermind the destruction of Chilean democracy in order to rob the country of its natural resources. They were, instead, a desperate string of failures and hastily improvised responses to a set of evolving problems that Washington barely understood.

By documenting and developing these arguments, my book offers an interpretation that promises to transcend the US-centered narrative that has long shaped historical writing, public opinion, and policymaking on the US and Latin America. My work offers a more nuanced, world-historical perspective. The United States certainly intervened in Chilean politics in the pivotal 1960s and 1970s. But the United States remained only one important actor among many, and hardly the decisive one. Rather, longstanding conflicts unfolding inside Chile shaped most of the outcomes we have long discussed and debated.

If my book helps get this history right, it can contribute to a more mature relationship between the United States and Chile -- and it can also help forge a model for improved American relations with the rest of Latin America and perhaps the entire Global South.

Read more in James Lockhart, *Chile, the CIA, and the Cold War: A Transatlantic Perspective*, (forthcoming).