

Unveiling Cold War Dynamics in Latin America: the Camelot Project

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Abstract

This article explores the historical context and implications of a controversial U.S. initiative during the Cold War aimed at analyzing and preventing revolutions and uprisings in less developed regions, particularly in Latin America. Emerging in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, the Camelot Project was driven by concerns about the spread of leftist movements in the region. It was developed in 1964 and it sought to understand and anticipate social changes through empirical research, with a focus on behavioral science and psychology. However, its implementation raised accusations of interference and espionage, leading to tensions between the U.S. and Chile, culminating in its rejection by the Chilean government and a Congressional investigation. The article analyzes the project's objectives and methodology and discusses the implications of its termination in 1965, its impact on perceptions of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, and its role in shaping authoritarian responses to perceived communist threats in the region. The Camelot Project served as a poignant chapter in the political and social history of Latin America, illustrating the intricate interplay between global geopolitical interests and the aspirations for self-determination of individual nations in the region.

Keywords: Camelot Project, Cold War, Chile, Behavioral Science, U.S.-Latin American Relations

Introduction

Historiographical perspectives on the Camelot Project in Latin America provide a theoretical contextual framework for analyzing the implications of a significant U.S.

initiative during the Cold War. The Camelot Project aimed to understand and prevent revolutions and insurrections in the region, focusing on empirical research, particularly in the behavioral and psychological sciences. Despite its failure to materialize, this initiative remains a subject of study and analysis in the field of political and social historiography. Assessments by authors such as Irving Louis Horowitz, Manno and Bednarcik, and Hernández Romero allow for exploration of the multiple historical and political dimensions associated with the Camelot Project.

Horowitz identifies a growing anti-American sentiment in Chile, fueled by concerns about the research program sponsored by the U.S. Army. The U.S. Ambassador to Chile actively engaged in efforts to obtain information about the project and counter growing criticisms, highlighting political opposition and concerns regarding its alleged reactionary and change-resistant nature (Horowitz, 1965).

Manno and Bednarcik's analyses provide an overview of the development and failure of the Camelot Project, highlighting its origins, objectives, and generated controversies, including the protest by the Chilean government and its subsequent cancellation in 1965. The project's failure is attributed to management errors and a lack of sensitivity towards the involved countries (Manno & Bednarcik, 1968).

Hernández Romero's analysis further delves into the controversy in Chile, examining the role of social sciences as a tool for U.S. expansion and dominance during the Cold War, with a particular focus on the Latin American context. The crucial role of social sciences in expanding U.S. dominance is highlighted, and the political and social implications of the Camelot Project controversy on international relations are analyzed (Hernández Romero, 2019).

In conclusion, the various perspectives regarding the Camelot Project outline its political implications and its impact on U.S. international relations, especially with Chile. These excerpts only represent some highlights of the existing historiography on the topic. The complexity of the academic debate on this subject is evident through the diverse perspectives offered by the cited authors, each of which contributes significantly to understanding the historical, political, and social context in which the Camelot Project fits.

Historical Overview

At the end of World War II, many nations in Latin America found themselves in a state of instability, affected by both economic issues and the spread of certain political and social ideologies. The Cuban Revolution (1953-1959) had a significant impact on the entire region, and the success of figures like Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and others, inspired leftist movements in many countries. As a consequence, Guerrilla groups and communist organizations emerged in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Colombia, among others. The growth of these movements, oriented towards social reforms often inspired by socialist models, raised concerns in the United States – especially engaged in the Cold War – which feared the global expansion of

communism. Therefore, the U.S. escalated direct and indirect interventions in the domestic politics of various Latin American countries, generating new controversies and conflicts. Washington supported local governments in the region, commonly authoritarians but considered allies, promoting anti-communist policies, and seeking to establish a firm grip not only politically, but also economically. This geopolitical and diplomatic framework contributed to shaping the political and social history of Latin America in the latter half of the 20th century, also generating a sense of mistrust and dissent towards U.S. interventionism in many parts of that area¹. With the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 (FRUS, Volume X Cuba January 1961-September 1962), relations between Latin America and the U.S. were marked by a series of containment policies by the latter. During that period, precisely from 1961 to 1969, the Alliance for Progress was formulated (FRUS, 1961-1963 Volume XII American Republics 69 Editorial Note). This project resembled a Marshall Plan for the region: the U.S. pledged \$20 billion in aid, encouraging Latin American governments to add \$80 billion for their economies. It was the largest U.S. aid program at the time and called for substantial institutional reforms in Latin America (FRUS, Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps, 1961-1969). Promoted and spearheaded by John F. Kennedy, this ambitious initiative aimed to stabilize, promote economic growth, and foster social progress in those countries (Allcock, 2014). He indeed encouraged the expansion of military and economic aid programs towards nations deemed most vulnerable to this threat, further promoting the formation of a special anti-guerrilla forces group known as the “Green Berets”, consisting of approximately three thousand men (Guderzo, 2010). Kennedy is often celebrated for seeking to promote an “America” engaged in the world, capable of providing an example of leadership and collaborating with nations in the hemisphere to address global challenges. Although it was directed towards Europe, in his speech on July 4, 1962, in Philadelphia (marking the 186th anniversary of the U.S. Independence) Kennedy emphasized the interdependence of the United States with other nations and the importance of jointly facing global challenges. He underscored that the prosperity and security of his country depended on the balance among nations worldwide, promoting ideas of cooperation and international partnership, and highlighting the importance of working together to address issues such as poverty, hunger, and the promotion of peace (US Government Printing Office, 1963, p. 1018). Nonetheless, it can be said that the Alliance was part of these efforts that represented a significant attempt to stabilize and develop the Latin American region. But the results were tempered by the complexity of regional dynamics and pre-existing socio-economic challenges. In fact, the project did not continue after the assassination of the U.S. president, and the initial commitment to its noble ideals gradually gave way to more pragmatic considerations,

¹ For a historical overview of the relations between the United States and Latin America from the 1970s to the 1980s, refer to Guderzo, Massimiliano. *Ordine Mondiale e Buon Vicinato. Gli Stati Uniti e l'America Latina negli anni di Carter 1977-1981*. Firenze. Edizioni Polistampa. 2012.

including the fight against the “Cuban model” and the promotion of North American economic interests. Furthermore, in March 1964, The New York Times leaked information that Thomas Clifton Mann, Undersecretary of State for Inter-American Affairs and Coordinator of the U.S. for the Alliance for Progress, supported a policy that advocated non-intervention against dictators if they were friendly to U.S. economic interests, but intervention against communists regardless of their policies (The New York Times, 1964). This principle became known as the “Mann Doctrine”, and the United States’ approach towards Chile was heavily influenced by this political stance.

In 1964, given the period of political turmoil and social changes Chile was going through, the U.S. government implemented a vigorous “intimidation campaign” against the candidacy of Senator Salvador Allende Gossens, a member of the left-leaning Popular Action Front (FRAP), in the Chilean presidential elections. This included, in addition to supporting Senator Eduardo Frei Montalva (a representative of the Christian Democratic Party), \$55 million in programmatic loans from the Agency for International Development, \$42 million in assistance under the “Food for Peace” program, and a propaganda campaign openly conducted by the United States Information Agency (and secretly by the Central Intelligence Agency) (Foreign Relations of the United States, 2009). However, when the Frei administration opposed U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in May 1965, President Lyndon Johnson proposed a “siesta” in economic assistance to Chile (Foreign Relations of the United States, 2009). The following month, relations between the United States and the South American country were further strained by revelations regarding the Camelot Project, which immediately created a negative impression throughout Latin America. Given the Cold War context in which the Camelot Project emerged and the atmosphere of tension due to the communist threat materializing in the United States’ “own backyard”, the project aligns perfectly with both the “Truman Doctrine”¹ and the Domino Theory².

Origins and Objectives

The project was conceived with the aim of analyzing and anticipating the origins of revolutions and uprisings in less developed regions of the globe (Central Intelligence Agency, 1965), with the goal of identifying strategies to prevent such events. It was devised in 1964 by a group of high-ranking officers of the U.S. Army associated with the Army Research Office of the Department of Defense. Therefore, it was sponsored

¹ Announced in 1947 by President Harry S. Truman, emphasizing that the United States would provide military, economic, and political assistance to countries threatened by communist influence.

² Articulated by Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, defining the role of U.S. foreign policy in controlling countries at risk of shifting towards a social-democratic, socialist, Marxist, or communist government. See also: Eggers, Keil. “Whistleblowing for Equitable Geopolitics Part 2: Project Camelot”. Octaguante. Conflict Transformation in Complexity. 2014, November 28.

by the U.S. Army in conjunction with the Special Operations Research Organization (SORO). This agency, in turn, was affiliated with the American University in Washington, DC and conducted a series of research projects for the army (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4).

The director of SORO, T. R. Vallance, told a Congressional committee that the research project on revolution and counter-insurgency was named after the mythical realm of King Arthur because «it connotes the right sort of things – development of a stable society with peace and justice for all» (Horowitz, 1965, p. 3). However, Camelot was just a code name. The official title of the research study was “Methods for Predicting and Influencing Social Change and Internal War Potential” (Rohde, 2009, p. 115). Vallance also described it as research «designed to produce a better understanding of the processes of social change and mechanisms for the established order to accommodate change in an effective manner» (Lowe, 1966, p.44). Nations selected for these studies included not only those in Latin America but also in the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Turkey), the Far East (Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand), and other European and African countries such as France, Greece, and Nigeria (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4). Furthermore, in a preliminary stage, a study on the separatist movement in French Canada was also being examined, which also had a code name: Project Revolt (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4).

The inability to resort to the immense arsenals at their disposal led military institutions to seek alternatives to hard power (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4), namely direct military intervention. The post-war period, therefore, brought about significant developments in the field of psychology: research was promoted to study “the mind of the enemy”, develop psychological operations (PSYOP), and support applied psychological research within the new bureaucracies of national security (Herman, 1995, p. 153.). The project’s working documents established as a study criterion that a country «should show promise of high pay-offs in terms of the kinds of data required» (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4), and although Chile did not meet these requirements, its relations with the United States during the 1960s were very close both economically and politically.

Numerous individuals, comprising both academics and newspaper professionals, played integral roles in the project. Among the key figures in the group of anthropologists and sociologists who conducted the research were Rex Hopper, chosen as the project director, and Hugo G. Nutini, a Chilean who had become a naturalized U.S. citizen. Hopper was a sociology professor and chair of the department at Brooklyn College. He was a well-known specialist in the Latin American region and had visited the area many times over the course of thirty years for research projects and conferences, including some sponsored by the government. Hopper had a longstanding interest in the issues of revolution, and he saw in this multi-million dollar project the potential realization of a lifelong scientific ambition (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4). Nutini, on the other hand, was an assistant professor of anthropology at

Pittsburgh and was supposed to focus solely on establishing contacts with academics at the Catholic University of Santiago. However, he managed to give the impression of being an official of the project with the authority to make proposals to potential Chilean participants (Horowitz, 1965, p. 4). He falsely claimed that the project was funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), misleading them about the fiscal sponsors (Herman, 1995, p. 157). Another figure involved was Johan Galtung. He was a Norwegian sociologist renowned for his research on conflicts and their resolutions in underdeveloped areas, especially in Latin America. He received an invitation to participate in a conference on the planning of the Camelot Project scheduled in Washington, DC, in August 1965, but he declined the invitation, refusing to accept the role of the American military as a sponsoring agent in a study on counter-insurgency (Pincus, 1965). Among his justifications was also the difficulty in understanding why there would be studies on counter-insurgency in Latin America, but not studies on “counter-intervention” (conditions in which Latin American nations might intervene in the affairs of the United States) (Horowitz, 1965, p. 5). Other actively involved groups included the press (El Siglo, Las Noticias de Última Hora, Clarín, El Día, and El Mercurio) and the Chamber of Deputies of the National Congress of Chile (Hernández, 2019, p. 112). El Mercurio, a conservative newspaper, published very few articles about the Camelot Project but was the only Chilean press outlet to receive funding from the U.S. government through the CIA in 1964 (Hernández, 2019, p. 123)¹. Another category, namely diplomats, involuntarily became participants in the project. A significant number of U.S. ambassadors have felt uneasy about the potential repercussions of public opinion studies funded by the U.S. Government in the nations where they serve (FRUS, 96. Paper Prepared in the Office of Research, United States Information Agency). In particular, obviously, the U.S. Ambassador to Chile, Ralph Dungan, was deeply affected when he learned about the Camelot Project through Chilean newspapers. He sought to obtain information from Washington about what was happening in Chile without his prior knowledge of it (FRUS, 279 Telegram From the Embassy in Chile to the Department of State)².

Methodology and Political Controversies

To achieve its goals, the program’s creators planned to go through several phases. This involved a specific focus on data collection and analysis, primarily relying on an empirical approach. They would construct models of population activities through surveys, measuring perceptions and expectations of authority, both legitimate and illegitimate, since the central hypothesis of the project was that it existed a «direct relationship between the level and scope of unmet expectations and the likelihood of internal conflict» (Navarro, 2010, p. 87). The starting point of the analysis, indeed,

¹ See also: Landis, Fred & Castleman, Michael, “The Cia Makes Headlines, Psychological Warfare in Chile”, Ann Arbor News, June 20, 1975. <https://aadl.org/node/199641>.

² See also: Lowe, George E., Op. Cit., p. 44.

was that «insurrection is the result of a state or a process of disintegration in some aspect of the social system» (Navarro, 2010, p. 87). Consequently, the project would have focused on collecting data on seven aspects: a) political development of the case; b) analysis of political disorders (episodes of violence), c) analysis of the government, d) analysis of insurgent organizations, e) institutional models, f) professional groups, and g) social background data (Navarro, 2010, p. 87). The final phase of the project was intended to validate the results of the previous stages – and the project as a whole – and then create a model to be applied to another national case (Herman, 1995, p. 156). Hence, the ultimate goal was to develop a universally applicable theoretical framework for diverse developing countries. This framework aimed to enable their governments to implement measures that could alleviate or prevent social tensions from escalating into situations of insurgency or internal conflict (República de Chile, Cámara De Diputados, Legislatura Extraordinaria, Sesión 33, Jueves 16 de Diciembre de 1965, p. 3138).

The Camelot Project was essentially a very simple program: it was primarily based on a questionnaire. The questions stemmed from comprehensive studies and research, but their public presentation was designed to be more straightforward compared to the plan's intricate purpose. Indeed, the projects were driven by the conceptual foundation of behavioral science, a paradigm advanced by the United States with the intention of shaping and regulating social behavior. The most important area of analysis focused on how to deal with the triad of “revolution\counter-revolution\counter-insurgency” at the heart of tension during the Cold War ((Navarro, 2010, p. 78). This triad became the main subject of analysis for social scientists directed by the U.S. Department of Defense. According to Galtung, the dynamic implemented by the United States can be referred to as “scientific colonialism”. By this term, he means «that process whereby the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself» (Galtung, 1967, p. 13). Galtung refers to a form of appropriation of knowledge production that occurs through the export of data to the most powerful nations (in this case, the United States), thereby creating a type of takeover of this knowledge. The result of this appropriation is the exclusive use of specific knowledge for the benefit of the countries to which it is exported, thus establishing a form of intellectual dominance creating «asymmetric patterns that contribute to manipulation in the interests of big powers» (Galtung, 1967, p. 14). The Project elicited negative reactions as it was perceived as an intrusion into internal affairs and an attack on national sovereignty. This contributed to fostering distrust and opposition to U.S. interference, a central theme in the political history of the region. Alvaro Bunster, the Secretary General of the University of Chile, came to the conclusion that the project was “of a political nature” and represented a serious threat to the sovereignty of Chile (Lowe, 1966, p. 45). Indeed, the plan clearly envisaged the possibility of intervention in other countries, despite the prohibition established by Article 19 of the Charter of the Organization of American States on interference, direct or indirect, in the internal

affairs of states, whether by armed force or by political, economic, and cultural means (Charter of the Organization of American States, Art. 19)¹. It is understandable that the Chilean government rejected the project and accused the United States of interfering in Chile's national sovereignty and engaging in espionage activities. Many of the discussions about the project took place during sessions of the Chilean National Congress. It is important to note that the original text of the project came into the hands of the Congress thanks to Galtung, who promptly informed Chilean scholars of the undeniable risks associated with such an initiative. These statements by the government of Frei Montalva led to significant tensions between the U.S. and Chile in 1965.

Tensions, Opposition, and Congressional Investigation

Conceived as an empirical study to analyze and prevent insurrections in less developed regions of the world, the project reflected the United States' interest in maintaining political and economic control in the region. However, its implementation sparked controversies and tensions with the involved countries, particularly with Chile, which denounced interference in its national sovereignty. The project, in fact, displayed many inconsistencies from the outset. According to Horowitz, there was a lack of treatment regarding which indicators should be used and whether a given social system in Nation A could be equally stable in Nation B (Horowitz, 1965, p. 46). Furthermore, as Rouquié aptly points out, in Chile the only institution that stood firm in favor of implementing the project was the armed forces (Rouquié, 1984 in Hernández, 2019, p. 115). The issue was also heavily debated in the Chamber of Deputies, particularly with the communist Jorge Montes, who first brought up the case. He mainly criticized the United States Department of Defense for organizing the project which, in his view, was a clear violation of Chile's national sovereignty. Montes argued that the Camelot Project aimed to interfere in the country's internal affairs, seeking to influence the Chilean political and social system in line with U.S. interests. He considered it as «an espionage activity presented under the guise of sociological research, which violated the norms of national sovereignty» (Hernández, 2019, p. 124). His accusation sparked a heated debate and helped highlight the controversy and opposition to the project within the Chilean Congress. The majority of the deputies then rejected the project, agreeing that it was organized by the U.S. armed forces, and called for the immediate involvement of the State (Hernández, 2019, p. 124). To conduct the investigations, a Special Investigative Commission (Comisión Especial Investigadora, CEI) was appointed. It was composed

¹ «No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State. The foregoing principle prohibits not only armed force but also any other form of interference or attempted threat against the personality of the State or against its political, economic, and cultural elements».

of deputies from various political parties, and Andrés Aylwin Azócar¹ was appointed as its president (Hernández, 2019, p. 125). Furthermore, several documents were collected from the Chamber of Deputies, which had been addressed to both Chilean and foreign individuals and institutions, in order to gather all types of reports or documents related to the Camelot Project. This included correspondence with figures such as Johan Galtung, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Inter-American Development Bank, and Washington D.C. (Hernández, 2019, p. 125). After analyzing all the documents, the CEI stated that the objectives of the project were: 1) to develop procedures for evaluating the potential for internal war within national societies; 2) to determine, with increasing precision and reliability, the measures a government could or would take to alleviate circumstances and conditions that had been assessed as elements of the potential for internal war; and 3) to assess the feasibility or possibility of prescribing the characteristics of a system to obtain and use essential information needed to achieve what was indicated in the previous points (Hernández, 2019, p. 125-126). Based on this, it was stated that the project did not have a scientific character, even though it appeared to be so, but its investigative methods were more akin to espionage (Hernández, 2019, p. 127). To prevent similar projects in the future, the CEI also proposed the establishment of an organization to oversee social researchers in Chile. Not coincidentally, over time, the norms for conducting social sciences research became very important in much of the world, particularly in Latin America (Hernández, 2019, p. 128).

Conclusion

The Camelot Project represents a significant chapter in the political and social history of Latin America, highlighting the complexity of dynamics during the Cold War and the interference of the United States in the region. The project incorporated approaches based on behavioral studies and psychology to understand social dynamics. This aspect underscores the U.S. interest in comprehending and, if necessary, managing social movements that could threaten political stability favorable to U.S. interests. By July 1965, approximately \$300 thousand had already been spent on the Camelot Project (Lowe, 1966, p. 44). However, later that same month, the entire project was canceled by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara due to all the unfavorable “publicity” surrounding it (Herman, 1995, p. 157). In a memorandum sent to President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk acknowledges that such studies conducted by private social scientists might not attract much attention, but the sponsorship of these studies by the U.S. military in foreign countries, like Chile, is seen as sensitive and potentially problematic (FRUS, 280 Memorandum From Secretary of State Rusk to President Johnson). Furthermore, the project was terminated in all the locations where it had been initiated, such as in India and Nigeria,

¹ Andrés Aylwin Azócar, 1925-2018, was a Chilean lawyer and politician, known for his defense of human rights during his country's military dictatorship. He was a member of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and served as the representative of the Republic of Chile in two terms: 1965-1973 and 1990-1998).

including the Franco-Canadian study (Lowe, 1966, p. 46). Hugo Nutini was prohibited from returning to Chile, and many foreign governments devised restrictions to prevent U.S. interference, in some cases, even completely shutting the door to American researchers.

Despite the strong controversy in Chile many Latin American governments, often supported by the United States, have adopted authoritarian policies in response to perceived communist threats. For example, it continued with the implementation of the National Security Doctrine¹ and Operation Condor (FRUS, 6. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Chile)². As it is known, social mobility in Chile and the legitimacy of left-wing parties eventually experienced a slowdown, not only due to the Camelot Project, but also as a result of the decision by powerful groups in the country to adopt a hardline approach: the coup d'état of 1973. The disappearances and killings of thousands of Chileans and others who were in the country were, in part, the result of this conservative reaction (Hernández, 2019, p. 133). The Camelot Project also highlighted how more powerful nations can acquire knowledge from developing countries for their own benefit, often at the expense of the interests and sovereignty of the countries involved. Therefore, in accordance with George Lowe, the sentiment of distrust towards U.S. foreign policy will change «only if and when the assertions that America does welcome social change – particularly in Latin America – is convincingly implemented by political action» (Lowe, 1966, p. 48). In summary, the Camelot Project stands as a noteworthy segment in the political and social narrative of Latin America, underscoring the delicate balance between global geopolitical interests and the aspirations for self-determination of individual countries in the region.

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¹ The National Security Doctrine refers to a set of military and political strategies employed by various governments, particularly in Latin America during the Cold War era. It emerged as a response to perceived threats, often linked to the spread of communism, and was influenced by the geopolitical dynamics of the time.

² Operation Condor was a collaboration among the intelligence services of various Latin American countries, including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil, in identifying and persecuting political activists and dissidents. The anti-communist ideology was the driving force behind this cooperation, emphasizing the serious human rights violations perpetrated by such regimes. See also: Dinges, J. (2012). *The Condor Years*. The New Press.; McSherry, J. P. (2005). *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.; FRUS. "6. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Chile". *Foreign Relations of the United States, U.S. Department of State*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v24/d6>.

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