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**Ideas versus Interests: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Honduras Coup  
of 2009**

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International Relations Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Committee Members: Steven Wuhs, Patrick Wing, and Michael Ng-Quinn  
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## Introduction

Berta Cáceres, a Honduran environmental activist and renowned human rights defender, was assassinated in her home on March 3, 2016. As a founder and leader of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH),<sup>1</sup> an organization dedicated to protecting the rights and land of Honduras' indigenous Lenca people, Cáceres had been experiencing death threats for several years. COPINH's main goal of halting the installation of a hydroelectric project on Lenca land had won the organization acclaim internationally, but was "conflicting with powerful economic and political interests"<sup>2</sup> within Honduras.<sup>3</sup> Cáceres, who had become a symbol of the international human rights movement, paid for her activism with her life.

In 2014, two years before her murder, Cáceres singled out the United States – specifically, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton - as the reason for Honduras' current climate of corruption and human rights violations. Referring to the United States' tacit approval of a coup d'état that occurred in 2009, Cáceres argued that Clinton's decision to recognize post-coup elections without reinstating the deposed president represented "the meddling of North Americans in our country."<sup>4</sup> This statement invoked a long history of U.S.-Latin American relations where the United States, exerting its power as the Western Hemisphere's sole hegemon, meddled in the internal affairs of Latin American countries to the detriment of democracy and human rights in the region. According to Cáceres, the 2009 coup

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<sup>1</sup> English translation of "Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras."

<sup>2</sup> Ariadna Tovar, "Berta Cáceres and the open wounds of Honduras," *Www.amnesty.org*, March 3, 2017, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/berta-caceres-and-the-open-wounds-of-honduras/>.

<sup>3</sup> While Honduran officials deny that the murder was planned by the Honduran government, the suspects arrested in the case appear to be former Honduran special forces officers trained by U.S. troops at the Palmerola military base. For more information, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/28/berta-caceres-honduras-military-intelligence-us-trained-special-forces>.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Goodman and Greg Grandin. "Before Her Assassination, Berta Cáceres Singled Out Hillary Clinton for Backing Honduran Coup." *Democracy Now!* March 11, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2017. [https://www.democracynow.org/2016/3/11/before\\_her\\_assassination\\_berta\\_caceres\\_singled](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/3/11/before_her_assassination_berta_caceres_singled).

that led Honduras down the path to becoming one of the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders was simply the latest development in a long history of U.S. meddling in Latin America.

The 2009 coup, widely blamed for Honduras' current state, sparked a crisis in inter-American affairs; after President Manuel Zelaya's forced removal from office, practically every country in the Western Hemisphere rushed to condemn Honduras' backslide into authoritarianism. Beyond being merely an unfortunate political event in Central America's most impoverished nation, the coup represented a challenge to the inter-American human rights and democracy promotion regime that came about as a response to brutal Latin American dictatorships in the Cold War era. Even more abstractly, the coup – and other American states' reaction to it – signaled the triumph of “realism over principles”<sup>5</sup> for some observers, while serving as a positive example of the Organization of American States' ability to mobilize American countries for a common goal, even if it failed. Theory aside, data from non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations show that human rights violations and crime rates increased dramatically after the coup, even when democracy was restored.

It would be easy in this case to say that self-interest won out over ideals. This reductive narrative would look at what happened in Honduras and say that the U.S. weighed their options and decided that democracy and human rights in Honduras were worth sacrificing in order to satisfy an array of political and strategic interests that the U.S. had in maintaining the deposed president out of power. However, no decision in foreign policy is made according to only interests or only ideals; it is invariably a combination of the two that involves trade-offs between morality and self-interest. Rather than claim that the U.S. made a rational decision to pursue its

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<sup>5</sup> Raúl Benítez Manaut. "La Crisis de Honduras y el Sistema Interamericano: el Triunfo del Realismo Sobre los Principios." *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, December 2009, Volumen 9, Número 4, [http://www.fes-seguridadregional.org/images/stories/docs/5059-001\\_g.pdf](http://www.fes-seguridadregional.org/images/stories/docs/5059-001_g.pdf).

own interests at the complete expense of its values, it is more useful to examine the struggle between ideas and interests that played out in U.S. foreign policy after the coup, and why it ended the way it did. Understanding how the U.S. will respond to attacks on democracy and human rights in Latin America is imperative in a region still struggling to consolidate democratic systems of government.

Accordingly, this project used the 2009 coup in Honduras as a case study with which to examine the role of human rights and democracy promotion in inter-American affairs, with special emphasis on the United States' treatment of the coup and subsequent elections in Honduras. Rather than try to blame or absolve the U.S. for the Honduran military government's success (not in executing the coup, but in their hold on the government that prevented Zelaya from returning to power by holding new elections), the paper seeks to examine the role of ideals of democracy and human rights in inter-American foreign relations. Specifically, it seeks to understand what combination of ideas – in this case, democracy and human rights – and strategic interests – economic, military, and political - form U.S. human rights policy. Analysis will be conducted through the lens of three principal theoretical strains of international relations, - neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism - and assess which one likely formed the rationale of U.S. decision-makers during the coup.

## **Literature Review**

This section will explain the theoretical background behind the question of the role of human rights in inter-American affairs. It will cover the main international relations theories, the nature of U.S.-Latin American relations, and U.S. human rights policy in Latin America.

### Theoretical Foundation

At the heart of the question of human rights' role in inter-American affairs is a conflict between three leading branches of international relations theory. Neo-realism, a modern deviation on Hans Morgenthau's theory of classical realism, "focuses on the state as a central actor in international relations and on the use of power, especially military and economic power, to achieve security in an anarchic system."<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, two leading neorealist theorists, added to Morgenthau's work by developing alternative theories of defensive and offensive neo-realism, respectively. While neorealism has driven U.S. foreign policy since the second half of the twentieth century, it has become somewhat anachronistic after the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of non-traditional, asymmetric warfare in the form of terrorism.

Neorealists would see U.S. dominance as the defining factor in inter-American affairs. Neorealist theory would emphasize that the U.S. has been and continues to be the regional hegemon, and its influence is strongest in Central America, where it has a long history of custodianship. With regards to human rights and democracy, the U.S. will support these ideals when it is in their best interest to do so; however, they can be disregarded in favor of political interest or national security. This means that the U.S. is free to contradict of the wishes of the Organization of American States, for example, and will do so when necessary to protect U.S. interest.

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory B. Weeks, *U.S. And Latin American Relations* (Hoboken, NJ, United States: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 2.

Neoliberal international relations theory, the other dominant theory in U.S. foreign policy, posits that “states and nonstate actors cooperate to realize joint gains or avoid mutually undesirable outcomes when they face problems they cannot resolve alone.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast to neorealism, this theory would argue that while the U.S. could use its power however it sees fit, it is in the entire hemisphere’s best interest that the U.S. cooperate – through the OAS or free trade agreements – with the other American countries to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. According to neoliberal theory, the U.S. has been and continues to be the regional hegemon, which allows it to promote democracy, human rights, and free trade within the hemisphere. Intergovernmental organizations such as the OAS and free trade agreements such as NAFTA are beneficial for the entire hemisphere. The U.S. should promote democracy and human rights because having democratic governments throughout Latin America is the best way to ensure peace, stability, and trade.

The third main theoretical strand, constructivist theory, posits that “state identity fundamentally shapes states’ preferences and actions. According to this argument, states don’t adopt certain foreign policies just because it is in their interest. They adopt them because state officials believe they live in the kind of state that should adopt such policies.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than argue that ideas become more important than interests in international relations, constructivist theory argues that certain ideas, such as democracy promotion, *become* concrete state interests because of decision-maker’s belief in them. Alexander Wendt, one of constructivism’s most prominent authors, argues that international politics behave according to social constructions rather than

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (United States: Cornell University Press, 1998), 119.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2007), 7.

inherent human nature.<sup>9</sup> Interests, then, are not based on an objective reality but rather are socially constructed and constantly contested.

According to constructivism, the extent to which the ideals of democracy and human rights influence inter-American foreign policy relies on leaders' internalization of human rights norms as well as the socially constructed relationships between American states. The U.S. (or rather, individual decision-makers) may promote human rights and democracy because they believe that is what the U.S. should do, but they may also have internalized notions of Latin American inferiority and treat the region as "America's backyard." The extent to which the U.S. honors the principles of human rights and democracy depends on how internalized these notions are in decision-maker's minds and worldview.

Although each theory has its own explanatory power in certain fields – i.e. neorealism's explanation for interstate conflict, and neoliberalism's explanation for economic relations – scholars such as Kathryn Sikkink argue that constructivism is most equipped to explain the emergence of the international human rights regime, which includes subsets like that of the Western Hemisphere. The neorealist school's focus on states' self-interest precludes the idea that they would promote human rights solely because of ideals; neorealists "argue that powerful states can do as they wish in international politics. Many countries are hostile to the idea of international supervision of their domestic human rights practices, but the most powerful state, or the hegemon, can afford to flaunt the rules. Realist theory leads us to expect that powerful states will adopt human rights policies only if they promote their interests, and other states will adopt such policies if they are embraced and espoused by the hegemon."<sup>10</sup> According to this outlook, the creation of the international human rights regime is a product of U.S. global hegemony; what

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 02 (March 1992), doi:10.1017/s0020818300027764.

<sup>10</sup> Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 119.

this does not take in account is that the draft of the U.N. charter, the symbolic beginning of the movement, was created with full participation from periphery states. Additionally, many regional human rights regimes, such as in Latin America, were created as a safeguard against the U.S. According to the realist model, hegemons would be able to promote human rights when beneficial, and ignore them when beneficial.

Liberal international relations theorists see U.S. human rights policy as a development towards an international system where states cooperate for mutual gains; however, “human rights issues are not easily modeled as such. Usually states can ignore the internal human rights practices of other states without incurring undesirable economic or security costs.”<sup>11</sup> Constructivism, pioneered by Wendt and others, explains U.S. human rights policy as the product of internalized norms about how the United States *should* act:

In the issue of human rights it is primarily principled ideas that drive change and cooperation. We cannot understand why countries, organizations, and individuals are concerned about human rights or why countries respond to human rights pressures without taking into account the role of norms and ideas in international life. Jack Donnelly has argued that such moral interests are as real as material interests, and that a sense of moral interdependence has led to the emergence of the human rights regime.”<sup>12</sup>

Constructivist scholars such as Kathryn Sikkink argue that, at least in the realm of human rights, idea-driven theory is most important for explaining the international human rights regime and U.S. human rights policy.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 120.

As previously stated, the idea of ‘ideas versus interests’ is in many ways a false dichotomy, as no foreign policy decision is ever purely one over the other; however, within the context of international relations theory, it is a useful way to contrast ideational (constructivist) and material (neorealist and institutional liberal) approaches to foreign policy. The former sees reality as inter-subjective, while the latter believes in objective reality and thus concrete material interests. For constructivists, it is norms and internalized beliefs that guide action, while the material theories pursue supposedly objective interests.

### U.S. Decision Makers and Human Rights

Much of the difficulty in defining a state’s human rights policy lies in the fact that different leaders can have very different ideas of human rights and how much to prioritize them. In the U.S., human rights priorities can change drastically from one presidential administration to the next; take, for example, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. It is therefore imperative to analyze what political scientist David Louis Cingranelli calls an individual decision-maker’s “operational code,” a “set of assumptions and a political philosophy about the world that tend to govern when the leader responds to action-forcing events afterward.”<sup>13</sup> Cingranelli describes four main typologies that U.S. presidents can hold on the role of morality and U.S. foreign policy: Nationalist, Exceptionalist, Progressive, and Radical Progressive, based on the two variables of who leaders should be held responsible to and whether ideals are national or universal.<sup>14</sup> For example, presidents on the Nationalist end of the spectrum believe leaders are responsible only to their own citizens rather than citizens of other countries, and emphasize national ideals such as domestic prosperity over universal ideals such as global peace and universal human rights. On

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<sup>13</sup> David L. Cingranelli. *Ethics, American Foreign Policy, and the Third World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993., 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

the other end of the spectrum, Radical Progressives believe themselves beholden to not just their own constituents but to all of humanity, and emphasize universal over national ideals; in the U.S. context, this is imagined as a president committed to a radical re-distribution of global wealth from the periphery to the core. Cingranelli, writing in 1993, maps the twentieth-century presidents into these four categories with most of them being in the Nationalist cell and with none in the Radical Progressive category. Cingranelli's analysis provides an analytical framework with which to determine U.S. president's moral typology and thus analyze or predict their foreign policy.

### U.S.-Latin American Relations

Historically, the U.S. has had a hegemonic relationship with Latin America since the days of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, a dominance which in most aspects continues today. Political scientist Lars Schoultz, in his book *Beneath the United States*, argues that the hegemonic nature of U.S. influence over Latin America is due not only to three main interests – “the need to protect U.S. security, the desire to accommodate the demands of U.S. domestic politics, and the drive to promote economic development”<sup>15</sup> – but more fundamentally to North Americans’ “pervasive belief that Latin Americans constitute an inferior branch of the human species.”<sup>16</sup> This view has its roots in modernization theory, which postulated that it was backwardness on the individual level in Latin America that accounted for their supposed inability to establish good government. Schoultz then proceeds to analyze major events in U.S.-Latin American relations from the 1820s to the 1990s, all of which illustrate in some way these three essential interests and this one fundamental belief. Theoretically, the inter-American human rights regime – a

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<sup>15</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U. S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 367.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, preface, xv.

hemispheric agreement to isolate countries, through the OAS, that violated human rights or democratic norms - was created in order to protect Latin American countries both from their own militaries but also against U.S. intervention, which facilitated the toppling of democratic leaders in the second half of the twentieth century.

### U.S. Human Rights Policy in Latin America

Kathryn Sikkink's *Mixed Signals* and Lars Schoultz *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America*<sup>17</sup> provide a historical and theoretical context for U.S. human rights policy in Latin America. Schoultz' work examines human rights policy towards Latin America in the 1970's and 1980's, and comes up with a framework that can be applied to the situation in 2009. For instance, he claims that "the question policy-makers address is not whether to incorporate human rights into to the decision-making process but rather how much influence human rights should have in relation to a host of other potentially conflicting variables" such as "human rights versus national security versus friendly relations with existing regimes versus economic benefits to the domestic economy versus humanitarian aid to impoverished people."<sup>18</sup> Schoultz also offers an explanation for why the American public seems to care very little about foreign policy towards Latin American, citing the complexity of foreign affairs, a "crisis orientation" that only draws public attention to the region when there is a crisis (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis), and lastly, the "absence of politically powerful ethnic or expatriate groups."<sup>19</sup> The last variable seems to no longer apply, as the Hispanic-American population in the U.S. has grown dramatically since Schoultz' writing. Schoultz identifies the main variables in

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<sup>17</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton, NJ, United States: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 109-110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

analyzing U.S. human rights policy towards Latin America as U.S. public opinion, interest groups, economic aid, military assistance, multilateral economic assistance, and U.S. private sector interests.

Sikkink's *Mixed Signals* provides an analysis of how mixed signals – contradictory or ambiguous messages from the U.S. that then are interpreted by authoritarian regimes as ‘green lights’ to continue repression – led to human rights violations during the age of dictatorships in Latin America. Additionally, Sikkink succinctly defines U.S. human rights policy as on a continuum of bilateral relations including: “private diplomatic discussions; public diplomatic statements; information generation and dissemination, such as the State Department on Human Rights Practices; reprioritizing aid decisions to reflect human rights goals; human rights training programs for military, police, or judicial personnel; sanctions, including trade sanctions and arms embargoes; implementing human rights policy through the judicial branch; participation in multilateral human rights verification and promotion missions; and military intervention to pursue a human rights goals.”<sup>20</sup>

#### Statement of Question

The outcome I am seeking to explain in the Honduras case study is how the United States responded diplomatically to the Honduras coup, what theoretical motivations motivated its response, and the broader implications of this response for human rights and democracy promotion in the hemisphere. Rather than documenting human rights abuses after the coup in an attempt to establish a correlation between the coup and such abuses – as has already been documented by various NGO's and IGO's<sup>21</sup> - I will assume such a correlation exists. The

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<sup>20</sup> Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch. “After the Coup: Ongoing Violence, Intimidation, and Impunity in Honduras.” April 29, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/12/20/after-coup/ongoing-violence-intimidation-and-impunity-honduras>.

question, then, assumes that the entire incident constitutes a failure of the inter-American system to protect democracy and human rights, and analyzes why the U.S. chose to abandon this system after initially leading the charge for Zelaya's return.

The gap in the literature that I intend to fill is how much U.S. hegemony over inter-American affairs has been constrained by the human rights reforms brought about during the third wave of democratization in Latin America. Though there is an abundance of literature on how the U.S. contributed to (or almost directly caused) violent anti-Communist repression in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is substantially less on whether things are truly different now. My research into the 2009 coup is therefore necessary because it will explore how much the ideas of democracy and human rights influence state behavior – especially that of the U.S. – in inter-American affairs.

I have produced three theoretical typologies which correspond to how the three major schools of international relations would view the U.S. role in inter-American affairs, and will compare the outcome I find in the data to these three ideal types to see which one is the most well-supported. The three types are:

**Realism:** The U.S. has been and continues to be the regional hegemon, and its influence is strongest in Central America, where it has a long history of custodianship. With regards to human rights and democracy, the U.S. will support these ideals when it is in their best interest to do so. However, they can be disregarded in favor of political interest or national security.

**Liberalism:** The U.S. has been and continues to be the regional hegemon, which allows it to promote democracy, human rights, and free trade within the hemisphere. Intergovernmental organizations such as the OAS and free trade agreements such as NAFTA are beneficial for the entire hemisphere. The U.S. should promote democracy and human rights because having

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democratic governments throughout Latin America is the best way to ensure peace, stability, and trade. However, if the U.S. sees what it interprets as a leftist, anti-democratic force in Latin America, it will intervene to protect free trade and U.S.-style democracy.

Constructivism: The extent to which the ideals of democracy and human rights influence inter-American foreign policy relies on leaders' internalization of human rights norms as well as the socially constructed relationships between American states. The U.S. (or rather, individual decision-makers) may promote human rights and democracy because they believe that is what the U.S. should do, but they may also have internalized notions of Latin American inferiority and treat the region as "America's backyard." The result, then, depends on the particular decision maker; a president who has internalized norms of human rights and democracy promotion who sees the U.S. as obligated to support these ideals in the Western Hemisphere will act to protect them, while a president who has internalized notions of Latin American inferiority and believe that the U.S. is not bound to international norms would do the opposite.

### **Research Method**

The Honduras coup of 2009 is an ideal case for examining the role of human rights and democracy in inter-American affairs for several reasons. Firstly, it is important for international relations scholarship to examine Central American countries such as Honduras, rather than just the strategically important states: "Up through the 1970s... The potential theoretical significance of certain cases was often disregarded because of their lack of geopolitical, demographic, or economic importance... Awareness of the limitations of extrapolating features of Mexico or the

Southern Cone to the entire region has only recently emerged.”<sup>22</sup> Second, the U.S. role in supporting right-wing Latin American dictatorships during the 1970’s and 1980’s is so important to U.S.-Latin American relations that examining how the U.S. reacts to a much more recent coup will shed light on how much has truly changed since those events. This has important implications for the inter-American human rights and democracy regime, and for the nature of the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America.

I chose the case study method because “it engenders an extensive dialogue between the investigator’s ideas and the data,”<sup>23</sup> which is necessary for handling the complexity of diplomatic relations throughout the hemisphere. Case studies “[make] it possible to address causal complexes – to examine the conjunctures in time and space that produce the important social changes and other phenomena that interest social scientists and their audiences.”<sup>24</sup> The temporal aspect of case studies is conducive to studying international diplomatic events because the amount of time that elapses between events – for example, the time it takes for the U.S. to cut off aid following some kind of crisis – can be significant in itself.

I chose a qualitative approach because the outcome I wish to explain is based on values – the role of human rights and democracy in inter-American affairs. The question requires examining not only the actions but also the ideals of the actors involved. Because of this, it is necessary to focus not only on measurable, statistical data but also on language and concepts. Qualitative approaches “allow for the development of differentiated and more closely focused concepts... These scholars [conducting case studies] are deeply engaged both with theory and

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<sup>22</sup> Amparo Méndez-Carrión and Fernando Bustamante, “*Purposes and Methods of Intra-regional Comparison.*,” ed. Peter H. Smith, in *Latin America in Comparative Perspective: New Approaches to Methods and Analysis* (59-81) (Boulder, USA: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), pg. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

with the close analysis of cases, giving them an unusual capacity to see the general in the particular.”<sup>25</sup>

Case studies also allow for the use of typologies in order to classify data and compare empirical outcomes to ideal types. This method has been used by international relations scholars in the past: “IR scholars have a long tradition of using explanatory typologies, including typologies of international systems and their associated stability or instability, types of states and their characteristic foreign policies, and types of individual leaders’ personalities and their decision-making styles.”<sup>26</sup> Creating typologies of the three theories I am examining – neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism – will allow me to “determine to which type a case can be characterized as belonging. Beginning with a typology, empirical data are coded as falling into one cell or another, guiding scholars to answer the question, ‘What is this a case of?’”<sup>27</sup> After coding the data according to these types, I compared the empirical outcome I observed to the ideal theoretical types.

I have conducted a qualitative historical case study of the Honduras coup, using journalistic accounts to create a detailed timeline of its most important events, as well as provided historical context of U.S.-Latin American relations, U.S.-Honduran relations specifically, and Honduran history. In order to thoroughly analyze all aspects of international reaction to the coup, I collected data from journalistic and official sources relating to Honduras from the date of the coup to the end of the following year, after the new president was sworn in and the affair was effectively over. Using the article database LexisNexis, I downloaded over 200 news articles in both English and Spanish and did not discriminate as to which articles

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<sup>25</sup> A. Bennett and C. Elman, “Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2007), doi:10.1177/0010414006296346, pg. 178.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 180.

would form my data pool. In this way, I hoped to minimize selection bias in the form of choosing specific sources or excluding information that did not match my thinking on the subject. After collecting my data, I thoroughly read and annotated all of the articles. I then created two separate timelines, one of strict historical chronology and the other of commentary or analysis from either the actors in the conflict or the journalists themselves. I then constructed the narrative chronology from the former, and the analysis section from the other, comparing the progression of events with changing perceptions of the U.S. and its motivations as time went by. While not all of the more than 200 articles in the data pool were used in the case study, I endeavored to eliminate any selection bias from this process by including a wide range of perspectives both ideological (pro-coup/anti-coup, liberal/conservative, etc.) and global.

### **Case Study Narrative Chronology**

#### Historical Context

Because the data is primarily journalistic, many sources include the Honduras coup within a larger narrative of U.S.-Latin American relations in order to give the event historical context. While some sources trace this narrative all the way back to the days of the Monroe Doctrine and Teddy Roosevelt's Big Stick,<sup>28</sup> most analysts and commentators went only as far back as the second half of the twentieth-century, beginning with the expulsion of Cuba from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962 as the only other country in history besides Honduras to be expelled from the organization.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the historical context given in the data, however, deals with the period of Latin American dictatorships in the late Cold War. The U.S.-backed coup d'état that ousted President

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<sup>28</sup> Hugh Graham. "U.S. and Latin America Trapped in Troubled History; Honduran Coup Proves Obama Will Need More than Platitudes to Chart a Way Forward." *Toronto Star*, June 30, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> "Diplomats Deliver Ultimatum on Honduras Coup." *The Guardian*.

Salvador Allende of Chile in 1971 is the most cited example of the historical baggage in U.S.-Latin American relations; one article quoted President Richard Nixon privately instructing State Department officials in 1970 to “[m]ake the economy scream to prevent Allende from coming to power or unseat him” as well as then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s comment: “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide to themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

Another important and frequently-cited development in this period is the School of Americas (SOA),<sup>31</sup> a military training school located in Georgia that trained many of the worst human rights violators of the dictatorship era, as well as some of the generals involved in the 2009 coup itself.<sup>32</sup> The SOA, which trained Latin American generals in anti-subversion tactics including torture and urban warfare, trained not only the general who led Honduras’ first military dictatorship in 1975, Juan Melgar Castro, but also Generals Romeo Vasquez and Luis Javier Suavo, who led the Honduras coup over thirty years later.

The journalists behind the articles in the data also frequently bring up the establishment of Honduras’ Soto Cano Air Base, also known as Palmerola, as a site for U.S. troops during the 1980’s, which continues today. The U.S. used Palmerola as a way to establish a base for anti-Communist efforts in the 1980’s, especially against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.<sup>33</sup> After the Cold War ended, Palmerola became a key instrument in the U.S. military’s anti-narcotics efforts, which also continue to this day. Most of the articles that reference close ties between the U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> Luis V. Teodoro. "Return of the Caudillo."

<sup>31</sup> Now re-named the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

<sup>32</sup> Luis V. Teodoro. "Return of the Caudillo."

<sup>33</sup> "U.S. Played Part in Honduras Coup, Says Official." *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 17, 2009.

and Honduran militaries bring up the establishment and continued presence of Palmerola as a U.S. base.

Moving away from the era of dictatorships, the next most frequently-cited bit of historical context given in the data is the coup that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti in 1991. Aristide actually experienced two coups (the other being in 2004), which different sources in the data cite for different purposes. The first coup in 1991 serves both as an example of how “mixed signals” from the Clinton Administration helped preserve a military dictatorship in Haiti for three years as well as a positive example of successful intervention when Aristide was restored in 1994 by a combination of OAS and United Nations (UN) force.<sup>34</sup> The coup in 2004, however, is used as an example of the U.S. supporting coup d’état’s as recently as five years before the Honduras coup, because the Bush Administration recognized the new government as legitimate and sent in troops to protect them.<sup>35</sup>

The OAS’ adoption of the democratic charter – which made democratic governance a prerequisite for belong to the organization in an attempt to consolidate democracy in the region – in 2001 is another oft-cited piece of historical context. Many articles frame the Honduras coup as a failure of this system to effectively prevent or reverse coups in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>36</sup> However, one coup was successfully reversed during that time – Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s brief expulsion from power in 2002.<sup>37</sup> This event is also used as evidence of historical baggage in the U.S.-Latin American relationship because of the Bush Administration’s support of that coup government and open contempt for Chavez.

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Weisbrot. "Spoiling Manuel Zelaya's Homecoming." *The Guardian*, September 23, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> J.M. Dube. "Support for Democracy in Honduras Coup Reaction." *Nanaimo Daily News* (British Columbia), July 7, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Odeen Ishmael. "Honduras Coup Reveals Fragility of Latin American Democracy." *Caribbean Net News* (Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands), July 24, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Lastly, many of the articles in the data point out Honduras' corruption and economic weakness compared to other Latin American countries. Honduras is frequently introduced as "one of the poorest countries in Latin America," where "eight wealthy families control politics, business and the media."<sup>38</sup> They also point out that Honduras still has extremely close ties to the United States both economically and militarily, and frequently point out that the Soto Cano Air Base housed roughly 500 U.S. troops engaged in counter-narcotics at the time.<sup>39</sup>

### Leading Up to the Coup

The story of why President Zelaya was ousted is still a matter of debate, and depends on one's political leanings. However, the historical record is clear on several issues. Zelaya, who hails from a wealthy ranching family, was elected as a conservative to the presidency in 2004, and gradually shifted to the left. He developed an admiration for Hugo Chavez's Venezuela and began to model some "*chavista*" policies, alarming the entrenched Honduran elite. These policies, considered populist by Honduran conservatives, included raising the minimum wage and expanding free education for Honduran children. Then, in 2008, Zelaya's Honduras joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), a leftist political and economic bloc in Latin America led by Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. That same year, Zelaya proposed a nation-wide referendum to write a new constitution, a move that many elites as interpreted as an attempt to re-write the constitution to extend his term and remain in power, as Chavez and fellow leftist President Rafael Correa of Ecuador had done several years prior.<sup>40</sup> This created a political and constitutional crisis which culminated in Zelaya firing the leader of the armed forces, Honduras'

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<sup>38</sup> Albor Ruiz. "Honduras Coup is More Bloody than Bloodless." *Daily News* (New York), August 2, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> "U.S. Played Part in Honduras Coup, Says Official." *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 17, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Marina Jimenez. "Honduras Coup at Odds with New Politics in Americas; Efforts to Resolve Crisis and Widespread Condemnation of Takeover Reflect Era of Stability in Hemisphere." *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), July 1, 2009.

Supreme Court declaring the referendum as illegal, and then to Zelaya's ouster from the country on June 28, 2009.<sup>41</sup>

Interpretations of what led to Zelaya's ouster can be basically boiled down to two opposing narratives. The first, commonly put forth by American and British liberal writers, is that Zelaya was not breaking the law by proposing his referendum and that his ouster was a reaction from entrenched Honduran elite who wanted to ensure Zelaya did not bring about a wave of democratic reform. The opposing conservative narrative is that Zelaya was modeling Hugo Chavez in his attempts to extend his term and turn Honduras into a socialist or *chavista* state, and his ouster was necessary to preserve democracy. These opposing narratives are important because they helped shape U.S. response to the coup. At the heart of the difference between the two narratives is the issue of whether the coup was in fact an assault on democracy or an attempt to preserve it; liberal voices argue the former, while Honduran and American conservatives take the latter. This in turn created division within the U.S. government, which culminated in Republicans pressuring the Obama Administration to recognize the post-coup elections as legitimate, thereby preventing Zelaya's return to office.

### The Coup and its Aftermath

#### Characters:

Manuel Zelaya: President of Honduras, elected in 2006 and removed by a coup d'état in 2009. Zelaya started out as a conservative president and gradually drifted to the left, allying himself with other members of Latin America's 'pink tide' of democratic socialists such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. An eccentric man who sported a trademark white cowboy hat, Zelaya

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<sup>41</sup> Helene Cooper and Marc Lacey. "In Honduras Coup, Ghosts of Past U.S. Policies." *The New York Times*, June 30, 2009.

maintained international media attention on the coup through dramatic acts such as sneaking into Honduras and taking refuge in the Brazilian Embassy under threat of arrest for several months. Though he was never restored to the presidency, as of this writing he represents Honduras as a member of the Central American Parliament.

Roberto Micheletti: Former Deputy of the National Congress of Honduras, who assumed the presidency after participating in Zelaya's ouster. Micheletti represented the de facto regime and fought hard to prevent Zelaya's return, which he did successfully. His brief presidency was marked by massive human rights violations.

Barack Obama: President of the United States who was initially praised by the international community for taking a hard stance against the coup and the de facto government, something uncharacteristic of U.S. presidents. However, after refusing to meet with Zelaya, staying silent on human rights violations in Honduras, and eventually acknowledging Honduras' new elections as legitimate, he quickly lost the respect that Latin Americans had given him as a supposedly new kind of U.S. president.

Hillary Clinton and the U.S. State Department: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the State Department initially followed President Obama's lead in condemning the coup and terminating non-humanitarian aid to Honduras. However, Clinton refused to classify the coup as an 'illegal military coup d'état,' and stayed silent on human rights violations in Honduras. Some commentators in the data accuse her of making a deal with Republicans in Congress to recognize the de facto government's elections in exchange for approving the Obama Administration's State Department appointees.

Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Alliance: President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and the countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our Americas (ALBA) – including Cuba,

Ecuador, and Honduras until 2010 - represent the forces of democratic socialism in Latin America. Most conservative arguments in favor of the coup framed *chavismo*, Chavez's brand of social and economic populism, as an existential threat to democracy and capitalism in the Western Hemisphere. A fierce supporter of Zelaya, Chavez was a loud voice in the coup's aftermath, threatening war with Honduras and accusing the CIA of orchestrating Zelaya's ouster.

Óscar Arias: President of Costa Rica who agreed to sponsor the San Jose Accords, a series of talks and agreements between Zelaya and the de facto regime. Seen as one of the more conservative actors in Latin America at the time, Arias had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his attempts to end the Central American wars of that period and was therefore an ideal choice to mediate.

José Miguel Insulza and the Organization of American States: Insulza, a Chilean politician, was at the time Secretary General of the Organization of American States, an intergovernmental organization charged with upholding democracy and human rights in the hemisphere. Insulza took a hard stance against the coup government and never wavered, yet ultimately failed in restoring Zelaya to the presidency.

Senator Jim DeMint and congressional Republicans: Senator DeMint led a small group of Republican congressmen who opposed Zelaya's return and openly supported the coup government, going so far as to visit them in Tegucigalpa. Many observers in the data trace DeMint's support for the de facto regime to an intense lobbying effort they conducted right after the coup, and blame Republican pressure on the Obama Administration for reversing the U.S. stance on not recognizing the new elections.

Lula da Silva and Brazil: President Lula da Silva, a center-left Brazilian president highly popular in his country and around the world, gave Brazil a leadership role in the Honduras crisis,

putting pressure on the U.S. to help isolate the de facto government and allowing Zelaya to take refuge in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa for several months. Brazil was seen as expressing a “Latin American consensus”<sup>42</sup> and was probably the most powerful nation-state actor in the conflict behind the U.S. and arguably Canada.

Porfirio Lobo Sosa: President of Honduras from 2010-2014 and elected in the post-coup elections orchestrated by the de facto government. Lobo’s presidency was marked by the same kind of human rights violations perpetuated under the de facto regime.

I have split the case study into three different sections corresponding to different stages of the coup and the United States’ reaction to it. The first phase covers the coup and the days following, in which the United States joined the rest of the world in sustaining pressure to reinstate Zelaya to the presidency; the second phase covers the beginning of the San Jose Accords, in which Costa Rican President Oscar Arias takes the lead in negotiations while the U.S. takes a supporting role, yet is criticized for its silence on human rights violations; and the third phase covers the United States’ about-face on recognizing the country’s new elections, thereby legitimizing the coup government and preventing Zelaya’s return.

### Phase One

The first phase of the coup covers the period in which the U.S. joined (or led, depending on one’s perspective) international condemnation of the coup and implemented its human rights policy in full force. This period ends with the beginning of the San Jose Accords, a U.S.-sponsored and Costa Rica-brokered pact to end the crisis, after which the U.S. scaled back their efforts.

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<sup>42</sup> Jorge Heine. "Latin American Stalemate." *The Record*, October 6, 2009.

President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras was abducted, put on a plane, and sent to Costa Rica<sup>43</sup> in the early hours of June 28, 2009.<sup>44</sup> A few hours later, the Honduran Supreme Court appointed Robert Micheletti, Deputy of the National Congress of Honduras, as interim president. Micheletti, the Supreme Court, and other coup planners argued that Zelaya had violated the Honduran constitution by seeking to amend the constitution, most likely to extend his term past the four years he was due. The coup – although the armed forces who led it would not label it as such - was met with near-universal condemnation from the rest of the world, including the U.S. and the rest of Latin America.<sup>45</sup> The Organization of American States held an emergency meeting condemning the coup on the very same day it happened.<sup>46</sup>

The next day, June 29, saw a chorus of international leaders – in some accounts, led by U.S. President Barack Obama, in others, by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez – and international bodies such as the United Nations condemn the coup and demand Zelaya’s return. President Obama said he was “deeply concerned” and that he called on “all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms, the rule of law, and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter,”<sup>47</sup> a sentiment echoed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she said Zelaya’s arrest should be condemned. U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens declared that Zelaya was the only president recognized by the U.S.,<sup>48</sup> and sent a cable to the State Department outlining his conclusion that the coup against Zelaya was indeed an illegal military

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<sup>43</sup> "Zelaya a Salvo en Costa Rica, Según Fuentes," *Xinhua News Agency - Spanish* (Tegucigalpa), June 28, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> David Salton, "Honduran President is Ousted in Military Coup," *Daily News* (New York), June 29, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Presidente Hondureño Detenido por Militares," *Xinhua News Agency - Spanish* (Tegucigalpa), June 28, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Rogers, "Leftist Leaders Hold Emergency Meeting over Honduras Coup," *Christian Science Monitor* (Managua), June 29, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> "Honduras: Golpe de Estado Contra Zelaya," *ANSA Noticiero en español* (Tegucigalpa), June 29, 2009.

coup.<sup>49</sup> Roberto Micheletti, faced with widespread condemnation, responded: “Nobody scares us”<sup>50</sup> and that “nobody, not [President Obama] and much less Hugo Chavez, has any right to threaten this country.”<sup>51</sup>

By June 30, the de facto regime had entered a siege position, seeming to hunker down in the face of international disapproval, such as a UN resolution calling for Zelaya’s immediate return.<sup>52</sup> However, many observers predicted that Zelaya would not be long out of power; even Zelaya himself said that the seizure of power would soon be restored because it did not have the U.S. embassy’s approval.<sup>53</sup> Barack Obama’s language seemed to corroborate that: “We believe that the coup was not legal and that President Zelaya remains the democratically elected president there.”<sup>54</sup> However, Hillary Clinton was still hesitant to put the event under the label of an ‘illegal military coup’<sup>55</sup> because that would require cutting off aid to Honduras.<sup>56</sup>

Latin American countries were also united in their response to the coup during this period. Brazil and the ALBA<sup>57</sup> countries removed their ambassadors, Central American neighbors El Salvador and Nicaragua launched trade embargos, and even more conservative Latin American states such as Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico joined in the condemnation. Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom declared that the coup “would cause a domino effect in the whole region,” while Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez agreed that the coup

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<sup>49</sup> Hugo Llorens, “Open and Shut: The Case of the Honduran Coup (A Selection from the Cache of Diplomatic Dispatches),” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2010, accessed March 17, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Star News Services, “Obama Condemns Honduras Coup,” *Windsor Star* (Ontario), June 30, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Rogers, “Leftist Leaders Hold Emergency Meeting over Honduras Coup.”

<sup>52</sup> “UN Assembly Condemns Honduras Coup,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Hugh Graham, “U.S. and Latin America Trapped in Troubled History; Honduran Coup Proves Obama Will Need More than Platitudes to Chart a Way Forward,” *Toronto Star*, June 30, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> “UN Body Condemns Honduras Coup,” *Al Jazeera*, June 30, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Despite Obama rather explicitly saying the coup was not legal in the early days of the crisis, the State Department never labeled the coup as an illegal military coup, though it did eventually cut off most of the aid that doing so would require.

<sup>57</sup> Bolivarian Alliance for the People of the Americas; a leftist political and trading bloc made up of Latin American and Caribbean countries, most notably Venezuela and Cuba. President Zelaya entered Honduras into ALBA during his presidency, which alarmed the conservative Honduran elite.

would be “contagious.”<sup>58</sup> Hugo Chavez went so far as to threaten a military invasion of Honduras if Zelaya was not restored.

In the face of international isolation, the Micheletti government found one political ally: Republicans in the U.S. Congress.<sup>59</sup> The de facto government began lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C. to try to convince sympathetic Republican politicians that Zelaya was a Chavez-style threat to both Honduras and American interests in Latin America. Senator Jim DeMint, a Republican from South Carolina, was especially sympathetic to this cause. June 30 was also the start of the de facto regime’s abuses of human rights. Pro-Zelaya protesters clashed with police in the nation’s capital, Tegucigalpa, Micheletti ordered a curfew that restricted freedom of movement, speech, and protest, and news organizations that expressed any anti-coup sentiment were quickly censored.<sup>60</sup>

July 1 saw the start of Zelaya’s attempt to negotiate with the de facto regime. Taking advantage of international media’s coverage of the event, he said that he would conduct a peaceful transition of power at the end of his term in January if he were to be reinstated.<sup>61</sup> Micheletti responded by calling Hugo Chavez’s bluff to invade Honduras, saying that only a foreign invasion could reinstate Zelaya and that he would be arrested if he returned to Honduras.<sup>62</sup> Brazil’s President Lula da Silva, in an attempt to leverage Brazil’s leadership role within Latin America, declared: “We had the experience during the 60’s of the last century of having military coups. We have stopped accepting all forms of co-operation with Honduras,

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<sup>58</sup> Tim Rogers, "Latin Leaders United Against Junta in Honduras," *Christian Science Monitor* (Managua), June 30, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> "Honduran Leadership Finds Friends Among GOP Lawmakers," *The Washington Post*, October 09, 2009, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/08/AR2009100802288.html>.

<sup>60</sup> "Military Seize Control in Central America Honduras Coup," *Geelong Advertiser* (Australia), June 30, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Sisk. "Honduras Prez: Restore Me and I'll Quit in Jan." *Daily News* (New York), July 1, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> "Honduras Coup Leaders Defy Calls to Reinstall President." *The Guardian*, July 2, 2009.

because they have to respect the democratic process.”<sup>63</sup> July 1 also saw massive blows to Honduras’ international military and economic connections; the Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank suspended aid while the Pentagon suspended joint military operations with the Honduran military.<sup>64</sup> In light of a planned Organization of American States delegation to Honduras, U.S. officials said they would delay labeling the event a coup until the OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza returned with a report.<sup>65</sup>

The following days saw increased human rights abuses in Honduras, and especially in the capital of Tegucigalpa. Micheletti issued an emergency decree limiting public gatherings, shutting down news broadcasters, and reinforcing security in the capital, all of which severely restricted freedom of expression and freedom of protest in Tegucigalpa.<sup>66</sup> The Organization of American States issued an ultimatum to the de facto regime on July 3, giving them 72 hours to reverse the coup or face sanctions and suspension from the organization.<sup>67</sup> The regime refused, but said that Insulza and all other international delegations were welcome to come to Honduras, with the obvious exception of Zelaya.<sup>68</sup> On July 5, the OAS expelled Honduras from the organization, the first time it had done so since expelling Cuba in 1962.<sup>69</sup>

July 6 brought an international incident which renewed the international media’s focus on the crisis, as Zelaya tried to enter Honduras on a plane supplied by Venezuela.<sup>70</sup> Zelaya’s plane was “flanked by the presidents of El Salvador, Argentina, Paraguay, and Ecuador, and the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> William Booth and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Honduras Targets Protesters with Emergency Decree; Media in Country Also Feel Pressure," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> "OAS Chief Travels to Honduras to Demand Zelaya's Return." *The Tico Times* (San Jose, Costa Rica), July 3, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Mike Faulk, "Keeping an Eye on Home: Local Honduran Students Watching Events from Afar," *The Anniston Star* (Alabama), July 4, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> "Diplomats Deliver Ultimatum on Honduras Coup." *The Guardian*, July 3, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Bill Hutchinson. "Honduran Army Blocks Fallen Prez's Return." *Daily News* (New York), July 6, 2009.

secretary-general of the Organization of American States, Jose Miguel Insulza.”<sup>71</sup> While the rest of the delegation was allowed to land, Zelaya’s plane was instead diverted to neighboring El Salvador. The Honduran Army shut down the airport and clashed with pro-Zelaya protesters, killing two.<sup>72</sup> A defiant Zelaya declared, “I am risking myself personally to resolve the problems without violence... If I had a parachute I would immediately jump out of this plane.”<sup>73</sup> He also seemed to have acknowledged that his attempt to return to Tegucigalpa was symbolic, and that a diplomatic solution would require Washington’s approval, saying: “From tomorrow the responsibility will fall on the powers, particularly the United States.”<sup>74</sup> The same day, the de facto regime pulled out of the OAS and rejected the democratic charter, despite having already been expelled.<sup>75</sup>

### Phase Two

Phase two covers the U.S. government’s persistence in putting pressure on the de facto regime through the San Jose Accords. In this period, the U.S. was generally still regarded as anti-coup and a positive force towards Zelaya’s restoration, yet the Obama Administration’s silence on human rights violations did not go unnoticed by journalists, other heads of state, and Hondurans themselves.

On July 7, Zelaya traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Hillary Clinton.<sup>76</sup> After the meeting, Clinton announced the beginning of the San Jose Accords, a U.S.-sponsored pact to be

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<sup>71</sup> "Honduras Coup Leaders Shut Main Airport." *The Guardian*, July 6, 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Hutchinson, Bill. "Honduran Army Blocks Fallen Prez's Return."

<sup>73</sup> "Honduras Coup Leaders Block Ousted President's Return." *The Guardian*, July 6, 2009.

<sup>74</sup> "Honduras Coup: President Not Allowed Back." *The Gold Coast Bulletin* (Australia), July 7, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> "Honduras Coup Leaders Pull Out of OAS." *Right Vision News* (Tegucigalpa), July 6, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> However, Zelaya was not given an audience with President Obama, then or at any point afterward.

brokered by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica.<sup>77</sup> Clinton stated: “We call upon all parties to refrain from acts of violence and to seek a peaceful, constitutional and lasting solution to the serious divisions in Honduras through dialogue.”<sup>78</sup> President Obama echoed this statement, saying that the U.S. supports “the principle that people should choose their own leaders, whether they are leaders we agree with or not.”<sup>79</sup> Both Zelaya and the de facto regime agreed to Costa Rica-sponsored talks.

However, Zelaya was still not allowed back in Honduras, and so he continued his penchant for political theatre, openly inciting his supporters to an “uprising.”<sup>80</sup> On July 25, with Zelaya still in the Nicaraguan mountains planning his return to Honduras, Micheletti imposed a border curfew on the Honduras-Nicaragua border.<sup>81</sup> As Zelaya was attempting to galvanize supporters and make his way back to the Honduran capital, the de facto government was escalating its repression against pro-Zelaya protesters and media. Several days later, on July 29, the U.S. revoked the visas of members of the de facto government.<sup>82</sup>

While President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica told the world to maintain pressure on the coup government on July 31,<sup>83</sup> developments in the U.S. were undermining its ability to sustain such pressure. The Obama Administration found itself influenced by “Republican congressmen in Washington and from conservative sectors in Latin America to search for a ‘compromise,’ one that would avoid reinstating the ousted president.”<sup>84</sup> These conservative elements defended the

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<sup>77</sup> Sisk, Richard. "Costa Rica Aid for Honduras." *Daily News* (New York), July 8, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> "Ousted Honduras President and Coup Leaders Agree to Talks." *The Guardian*, July 8, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> "Deposed Leader Calls for an Uprising." *MX* (Australia), July 15, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> "Border Curfew in Honduras." *Irish News*, July 25, 2009.

<sup>82</sup> "Honduras: U.S. Revokes De Facto Government Visas." *Ottawa Citizen*, July 29, 2009.

<sup>83</sup> "Arias Tells World to Maintain the Pressure." *Morning Star*, July 31, 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Jorge Heine. "With the Generals or the Democrats?; Canada Should Send a Clear Signal by Pressing for the Quick Return of Ousted Honduran Leader." *The Toronto Star*, August 9, 2009.

coup by placing the events in Honduras within the larger context of ‘*chavismo*,’<sup>85</sup> such as Honduran General Miguel Angel Garcia, who said, “Central America was not the objective of this communism disguised as democracy... This socialism, communism, *chavismo*, we would call it, was headed to the heart of the United States.”<sup>86</sup> However, the Republican representatives’ pressure did not yet affect U.S. policy toward Honduras in a substantial way.

By August 14, the situation in Honduras was very clearly deteriorated. Human rights violations were rampant, especially in the interactions between protesters and the military, who many human rights organizations accused of targeting political opposition and conducting forced disappearances.<sup>87</sup> The Honduran economy was also in dire straits; one source reported, “Estimates indicate that import-export activity is down by 60 percent. More than 200 road barricades have been erected, facing repression by the army trying to keep produce moving.”<sup>88</sup> However, the Honduran economy still had one major protection: the U.S. had not imposed trade sanctions, which would have further decimated it.

The contrast between Brazil and the U.S. is illuminating in this regard. Brazil had expressed a kind of “Latin American consensus”<sup>89</sup> by championing the cause of democracy promotion in the hemisphere (an honor that would have gone to Venezuela, if its democratic credentials were not tainted by Hugo Chavez’s brand). On August 14, Brazil pressured Washington to impose trade sanctions on the regime, with Brazilian Foreign Minister Celson Amorim stating that “the reestablishment of democracy would largely depend on the U.S.

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<sup>85</sup> The populist, democratic socialist ideology named after Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

<sup>86</sup> Jorge Heine. "With the Generals or the Democrats?; Canada Should Send a Clear Signal by Pressing for the Quick Return of Ousted Honduran Leader."

<sup>87</sup> *After the Coup: Ongoing Violence, Intimidation, and Impunity in Honduras*, Human Rights Watch, 2010, accessed March 16, 2017, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/honduras1210webwcover\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/honduras1210webwcover_0.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> "Honduras Coup Regime Sends Military in Against Protesters." *Irish News*, August 14, 2009.

<sup>89</sup> Jorge Heine. "Latin American Stalemate."

position.”<sup>90</sup> This was the beginning of Latin American leaders’ perception that U.S. was essentially dragging its feet on Zelaya’s restoration, despite taking a leadership role in the San Jose Accords. Zelaya himself, for instance, had “urged Washington to withdraw its ambassador from Honduras, block the coup leaders’ visas and freeze their bank accounts,” which the U.S. refused to do “despite public condemnation.”<sup>91</sup>

In an event seemingly unrelated to the coup, on August 15 the U.S. and Colombia finalized a deal to give the U.S. access to three air bases, two navy bases, and two army bases in Colombia.<sup>92</sup> While the event did not directly correspond to the Honduras coup, it did anger ALBA countries who saw it as further U.S. encroachment into Latin America, as well as serving as a reminder of the U.S.’ other main base in Latin America: the Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras.

On August 26, nearly two months after the coup, the San Jose Accords received a boost from an OAS delegation who arrived in Tegucigalpa to show their support for the agreement.<sup>93</sup> The delegation was comprised of foreign ministers from Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>94</sup> However, this did not deter the de facto regime from announcing formal campaigning for the next presidential election several days later.<sup>95</sup> At this point, the U.S. remained committed to not acknowledging the elections as legitimate, with State Department Spokesman Phillip J. Crowley stating: “Based on conditions as

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<sup>90</sup> Mellen, Tom. "U.S. Urged to Step in on Honduras Coup." *Morning Star*, August 14, 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> "U.S. Military Presence in Colombia Will Undermine Regional Security: Venezuelan Ambassador." *Right Vision News* [Pakistan] August 6, 2009.

<sup>93</sup> "OAS Puts Pressure on Honduras Coup Leadership." *Morning Star*, August 26, 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> "World in Brief." *Morning Star*, September 1, 2009.

they currently exist, we cannot recognize the results of this election. So for the de facto regime, they're now in a box."<sup>96</sup>

On September 4, the State Department backed its words with actions, formally terminating \$31 million in non-humanitarian aid to Honduras both to support the San Jose Accords and punish Honduras for its "continuing failure to restore democratic, constitutional rule."<sup>97</sup> Zelaya, encouraged by this action, declared: "It is gratifying that the United States has taken a strong position against the coup... Today, I can assure you that my return to Honduras is imminent."<sup>98</sup> However, the decision to terminate aid had repercussions that would ensure the opposite of Zelaya's prediction. The announcement "triggered new opposition from Republicans in Congress who [had] denounced the Obama Administration and held up some diplomatic appointments in protest," a development which many observers argue led to the U.S. reversing its stance on the elections later on.<sup>99</sup>

Later that month, on September 21, Zelaya made another dramatic move by sneaking into Tegucigalpa and taking shelter from arrest at the Brazilian embassy, where he would remain until after the new elections concluded in January.<sup>100</sup> The de facto government shut down the capital in response, imposing new curfews and once again clashing with pro-Zelaya supporters who were gathered outside the embassy.<sup>101</sup> Human rights violations spiked once again. Hillary Clinton, when asked about such violations, responded: "I think that the government imposed a curfew, we just learned, to try to get people off the streets so there couldn't be unforeseen

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<sup>96</sup> "U.S. Ceases Aid over Honduras Coup; Clinton Attacks Regime's Failure to Restore Democratic Rule." *Morning Star*, September 5, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Sheridan, Mary Beth. "U.S. May Not Recognize Results of Honduran Vote." *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2009.

<sup>100</sup> "Ousted Honduran Leader Returns to Country Calling for Negotiations." *Cape Argus* (South Africa), September 22, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

developments.”<sup>102</sup> Hillary Clinton made no mention of other human rights violations occurring at the same time, although the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, Hugo Llorens, condemned some of these violations around the same time. On September 27, Zelaya claims he and his supporters were hit by a toxic gas attack, though who carried it out was not confirmed.<sup>103</sup>

On October 2, a delegation of Republican Congressmen led by Senator Jim DeMint met with Micheletti and the presidential candidates for the November election in Tegucigalpa, where they expressed their support for the regime yet pressured Micheletti to restore civil liberties.<sup>104</sup> This was in reference to an emergency decree limiting freedom of the press signed in September, which U.S. Ambassador Hugo Llorens said “damaged civil liberties like nothing else has in a long time here.”<sup>105</sup> Following the visit, Micheletti announced that the decree would soon be lifted, while Senator DeMint supported the coup government by saying that even the label of ‘coup’ to define what happened in Honduras was “ill-informed and baseless.”<sup>106</sup>

Zelaya remained holed up in the Brazilian embassy while the San Jose Accords continued. On October 8, an OAS delegation of diplomats from the U.S., Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean met again in Tegucigalpa to negotiate with a defiant Micheletti.<sup>107</sup> The talks, which continued into the next day, sparked protests in the capital which were quickly broken up by Honduran police.<sup>108</sup> On October 24, news outlets reported that the “latest round of talks to resolve the dispute over Honduras’ coup has ended in failure.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Mark Weisbrot. "Spoiling Manuel Zelaya's Homecoming." *The Guardian*, September 23, 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Stevenson, Mark. "'Toxic Gas Attack' on Ousted Honduran President." *Scotland on Sunday*, September 27, 2009.

<sup>104</sup> "GOP delegation visits Honduras," *Arizona Daily Sun*, October 03, 2009, accessed March 17, 2017, [http://azdailysun.com/news/world/gop-delegation-visits-honduras/article\\_9c462db5-55ab-5dab-a15b-e32cf0849291.html](http://azdailysun.com/news/world/gop-delegation-visits-honduras/article_9c462db5-55ab-5dab-a15b-e32cf0849291.html).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> "Micheletti Regime Resists Pressure to Return Zelaya to power." *Morning Star*, October 9, 2009.

<sup>108</sup> "Honduras Coup: Police Break Up Protests at Site of Talks." *Brattleboro Reformer* (Vermont), October 9, 2009.

<sup>109</sup> Margaret Neighbour. "Talks Over Honduras Coup Fail." *The Scotsman*, October 24, 2009.

Then, on October 31, came a strange turning point; the de facto regime agreed to sign a deal that would end the crisis and possibly restore Zelaya. Micheletti announced that he had “authorized a negotiating team to sign a deal that marks the beginning of the end of the country’s political situation” and that the deal included “the most contentious subject in the deal, the possible restitution of Mr. Zelaya to the presidency.”<sup>110</sup> From inside the Brazilian embassy, Zelaya praised the agreement as a “triumph for democracy” that would bring “peace for Honduras.”<sup>111</sup> He then repeated his prediction that he would soon be reinstated, saying: “I think my restitution is imminent – it’s not going to happen in two days, but it will be over the next few days.”<sup>112</sup> What Zelaya did not realize was that other agreements were being reached behind the scenes, and that Micheletti and his government likely had never intended to allow Zelaya back to the presidency.

### Phase 3

Phase 3, the last period of the coup and its aftermath that I have included in my case study, starts at the U.S.’ reversal on its decision not to acknowledge the coup, and ends on the first anniversary of Zelaya’s ouster. After the U.S. position effectively killed the San Jose Accords and the new president took office, the international journalistic attention that formed the core of my case study quickly lost interest and dropped off, making this last phase the shortest of the three.

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<sup>110</sup> “New Deal Could See Zelaya Return; Rightful Leader May Resume Post After Coup Leaders Back Down.” *Morning Star*, October 31, 2009.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

On November 4, 2009, the international community was stunned to hear that the U.S. would recognize the results of Honduras' new elections.<sup>113</sup> The rest of the world, but especially Latin American leaders such as Zelaya, Chavez, and Lula da Silva, were furious. The about-face effectively solidified the coup by ensuring the new president would be considered legitimate and by making Zelaya's return practically impossible. It is unclear whether the de facto regime's own seeming reversal several days prior on whether to possibly restore Zelaya was genuine or if they had advance knowledge of the U.S.' change in position. One possibility is that the Micheletti government finally reached a point where it felt the international pressure was too high, and reluctantly agreed to the possibility of reinstating Zelaya. Another possibility, as suggested by some observers in the data, is that the Honduran government knew that the U.S. would eventually recognize the new elections despite "lip service"<sup>114</sup> to preserving democracy, and their brief reversal represented them giving up on that idea, to which the U.S. responded by reassuring them of their support as some sort of unspoken agreement. The last possibility, proposed by many journalists in the data, is that the regime's brief reversal was some sort of coordination with the U.S. government who had promised them behind-the-scenes that their new elections would be recognized, and so they must appear to "cool down"<sup>115</sup> the coup for appearance's sake. However, none of these hypotheses are empirically supported simply because any records of private correspondence or deals between the regime and the U.S. State Department, if they exist at all, have not yet been declassified.

It is also, of course, a matter of debate as to why the U.S. government changed its position after having supported Zelaya initially; rather than speculate as to secret behind-the-

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<sup>113</sup> "Honduran Coup Leader May Step Aside 'For a Week'" *Irish News*, November 21, 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Calvin Tucker. "Trampling on Honduran Democracy." *The Guardian*, November 26, 2009.

<sup>115</sup> "Honduras Coup is Cooling." *The New York Post*, September 29, 2009.

scenes developments, I have chosen to examine this question from a theoretical approach, which will come in the analysis section.

On November 18, Honduran lawmakers decided that they would hold a vote on whether or not to restore Zelaya to the presidency for the short remainder of time left in his original term.<sup>116</sup> While this may seem uncharacteristic, it is likely that they were merely following the terms of the San Jose Accords which required them to vote on the restoration, but not necessarily to approve it.<sup>117</sup>

The regime government increased its human rights-violating behavior in the run-up to the election as it deployed troops, arrested protesters, and broadcasted government propaganda throughout the country.<sup>118</sup> Out of three candidates for the presidency, the only one who had taken a stance against the coup, Carlos Reyes, had dropped out of the race and declared the elections as fraudulent, leaving two pro-coup candidates still in the race. On November 29, the conservative rancher Porfirio Lobo won the election.<sup>119</sup> The U.S. was joined by the more conservative Latin American states of Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, and Colombia in recognizing the election as legitimate.<sup>120</sup>

After this point, media attention on the Honduras coup diminished significantly, after the possibility of a dramatic return by Zelaya was no longer likely. Nonetheless, there are several significant developments after November 29 that are important to the case study. On December 10, with Zelaya still in the Brazilian embassy, Micheletti declared that Zelaya could leave Honduras without being arrested only as a political exile – not as the president of Honduras.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> "Honduran Officials to Rule on Zelaya." *Star News* (Wilmington, North Carolina), November 18, 2009.

<sup>117</sup> "Honduran MPs Debate Zelaya's Future." *Morning Star*, December 3, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> Rory Carroll. "Honduras Coup: Troops Deployed to Oversee Election." *The Guardian*, November 27, 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Adrian Roberts. "Britain - MPs Slam 'Illegitimate' Elections." *Morning Star*, November 30, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> "Honduran MPs Debate Zelaya's Future." *Morning Star*, December 3, 2009.

<sup>121</sup> "Honduras Refuses to Let Ousted Leader Leave Country Unless He Declares Himself Political Exile." *Carleton Place* (Mexico City), December 10, 2009.

Zelaya would have to seek asylum as a private citizen and effectively renounce his presidency, an offer that he refused.

In the following year, 2010, the Honduran Congress took steps to dismantle the leftist institutions Zelaya had tried to build during his term. The most significant of these was to remove Honduras from ALBA, cutting off ties to the likes of Cuba, Venezuela, and Ecuador.<sup>122</sup> Later that month, on January 27, Zelaya's term officially ended while Porfirio Lobo's began.<sup>123</sup> Zelaya, whose term was now over and could not claim to be president of Honduras any longer, coup or not, was finally able to leave Tegucigalpa and seek refuge in the Dominican Republic.<sup>124</sup> Human rights violations throughout the transition period and during Lobo's administration continued; one source spoke of "death squad-type repression" continuing months after Lobo assumed the presidency.<sup>125</sup> However, these human rights violations did not spark outrage or punishment from the U.S., Lobo's main ally; in fact, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens openly criticized Zelaya for the first time in May of that year, saying he acted recklessly and took an "erratic and imprudent course of action."<sup>126</sup> For the remainder of 2010, Lobo campaigned to be recognized as legitimate by the international community, though rampant human rights violations made this a difficult task.<sup>127</sup>

The last entry in the data set is dated on the anniversary of the coup on June 28, 2010, and relays Zelaya's accusation that the coup was "made in USA."<sup>128</sup> He went on to say that every

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Haste. "Turning Against the Poor; Chavez and Zelaya Condemn Withdrawal from Trade Treaty as 'Right-Wing Agenda'" *Morning Star*, January 14, 2010.

<sup>123</sup> "Sides Polarised over Swearing in of Honduras Coup President." *Morning Star*, February 1, 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Emile Schepers. "Reverberations of Honduras Coup Continue." *Morning Star*, June 8, 2010.

<sup>126</sup> "World Digest." *St. Louis Post* (Missouri), May 1, 2010.

<sup>127</sup> Emile Schepers. "Reverberations of Honduras Coup Continue."

<sup>128</sup> "Honduras: Golpe de Estado 'Made In USA.'" *ANSA Noticiero en español* (Tegucigalpa), June 28, 2010.

action the U.S. takes – referring here to supporting Porfirio Lobo – is taken in order to help North American oil companies.<sup>129</sup> The story concludes here.

### **Analysis**

This section will analyze U.S. policy towards the coup during each of the phases, utilizing both the hypotheses given in the data and my own theoretical interpretation. The journalistic accounts mostly focus on how historical memory of U.S.-Latin American relations affects the U.S. stance, while I will use the various strains of international relations theory to evaluate the U.S. stance.

### Phase One

The sources in the data primarily analyze the initial U.S. response to the coup through the lens of historical U.S.-Latin American relations and the promise of newly-elected President Obama to uphold democracy in the region. Journalists emphasized historical memory of the ‘dark days’ of the 1970’s and 1980’s when the U.S. supported or installed right-wing dictatorships throughout Latin America. Just a few of the many headlines on the subject read: “U.S. and Latin America Trapped in Troubled History,”<sup>130</sup> “Back to the Dark Ages,”<sup>131</sup> “In Honduras Coup, Ghosts of Past U.S. Policies,”<sup>132</sup> “Honduras Coup at Odds with New Politics in

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<sup>129</sup> While this is a debatable point, the new Honduran regime was in fact much more open to U.S. companies extracting resources from Honduras than Zelaya had been.

<sup>130</sup> Graham, Hugh. "U.S. and Latin America Trapped in Troubled History; Honduran Coup Proves Obama Will Need More than Platitudes to Chart a Way Forward."

<sup>131</sup> "Back to the Dark Ages." *Morning Star*, June 30, 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Helene Cooper and Marc Lacey. "In Honduras Coup, Ghosts of Past U.S. Policies." *The New York Times*, June 30, 2009.

Americas,”<sup>133</sup> and “Return of the Caudillo.”<sup>134</sup> Many of the diplomatic actors in the conflict echoed these statements themselves. President Obama said on the topic,

It would be a terrible precedent if we start moving backwards into the era in which we are seeing military coups as a means of political transitions rather than democratic elections. The region has made enormous progress over the last 20 years in establishing democratic traditions... We don't want to go back to a dark past.”<sup>135</sup>

Various academic experts on Latin America agreed. Kevin Casas, a Latin Americanist at the Brookings Institution, said “What we are witnessing in Honduras is the return of the sad role of the military elite as the ultimate referee of the political conflicts between the civilian leadership. This is a huge step back in the democratic consolidation of the region.”<sup>136</sup> Roberto Lovato, a journalist who writes about immigration and U.S.-Latin American relations, argued: “

President Obama and the U.S. can actually do something about a military crackdown that our tax dollars are helping pay for. That [coup general] Vasquez and other coup leaders were trained at the WHINSEC [Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), which also trained Augusto Pinochet and other military dictators responsible for the deaths, disappearances, and tortures of hundreds of thousands in Latin America, sends profound chills throughout a region still trying to overcome decades of U.S.-backed

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<sup>133</sup> Jimenez, Marina. "Honduras Coup at Odds with New Politics in Americas; Efforts to Resolve Crisis and Widespread Condemnation of Takeover Reflect Era of Stability in Hemisphere." *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), July 1, 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Luis V. Teodoro. "Return of the Caudillo." *BusinessWorld*, July 17, 2009.

<sup>135</sup> "UN Body Condemns Honduras Coup." *Al Jazeera*.

<sup>136</sup> Tim Rogers. "Leftist Leaders Hold Emergency Meeting over Honduras Coup."

militarism... the coup represents a major opportunity for Obama to make real his recent and repeated calls for a ‘new’ relationship to the Americas.<sup>137</sup>

While this historical memory was undoubtedly present in the minds of the leaders involved, many of the sources in the data imply or directly claim that this historical memory was actively affecting U.S. policy. One source describes that “the U.S., wary of its history of meddling in Latin American politics, tried to stay on the sidelines” of the dispute between Zelaya and Micheletti.<sup>138</sup> Another claimed that Hillary Clinton gave the role of mediator in the conflict to Costa Rica in order to “avoid the appearance of U.S. bigfooting.”<sup>139</sup>

Such claims are inherently constructivist in that they attribute “principled ideas”<sup>140</sup> – in this case, the idea that the U.S. should atone for or distance itself from its past behavior towards Latin America – as the driving force behind U.S. policy in this case. The argument was that Obama, who had openly expressed commitment to democracy and human rights in U.S.-Latin American relations in the past, was a different kind of U.S. president from some of his predecessors such as George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan. This, too, relies on the constructivist notion that policy is affected by decision-makers internalizing international norms, which then translates into policy.

In this first phase by itself, where the Obama Administration condemned the coup with little hesitation, the constructivist argument does seem to hold up. However, by the end of the case study with the coup having ‘won,’ many commentators accuse Obama and Clinton of

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<sup>137</sup> John Nichols. "Honduras Coup Raises Challenges for Obama, Feingold." *The Capital Times* (Madison, Wisconsin), June 30, 2009.

<sup>138</sup> "Caribbean Adds Voice Against Honduras Coup." *Caribbean Net News* (Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands), June 30, 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Sisk. "Costa Rica Aid for Honduras."

<sup>140</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 119.

having always been on the side of the de facto government and having never intended to restore Zelaya. I do not subscribe to this argument for two main reasons: first, it is reductive, and second, there would be no point to paying ‘lip service’ to democracy and human rights if the Obama Administration did in fact take a strictly neo-realist view of the event and decided it was in their best interests to side against Zelaya. An administration that did not consider itself constrained by international society’s expectations of it would not put up a front of respecting democracy and human rights just for the sake of reputation.

As such, I conclude that in this first phase, it was ideas of democracy and human rights – what the U.S., or more specifically President Obama, believed it *should* do – that drove U.S. foreign policy. If it was a neorealist philosophy that guided the administration in this first phase, then they would have quickly concluded that Zelaya had been a threat to American interests in the region and that international disapproval was a small price to pay for having a pro-U.S. government in Central America.<sup>141</sup> Instead, the U.S. condemned the coup and attempted to restore Zelaya to power through diplomatic channels, which indicates that the administration was acting on internalized notions of upholding democracy and human rights, and that historical memory likely did influence U.S. policy toward Honduras.

This claim is supported by Cingranelli’s analysis of decision makers’ positions on morality and U.S. foreign policy. Within Cingranelli’s four typologies, President Obama fits most squarely in the Progressive category, which is distinguished by giving “relatively greater weight to universal [rather than national] ideals in the making of foreign policy.”<sup>142</sup> Progressive decision makers attempt to achieve “the national self-interest and, once assured it is protected, will seek to advance the welfare of humankind” and are “more likely to advocate multilateral

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<sup>141</sup> Especially one that houses U.S. troops.

<sup>142</sup> David L. Cingranelli. *Ethics, American Foreign Policy, and the Third World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, 137.

rather than unilateral action in world affairs.”<sup>143</sup> Obama, especially in the early days of his presidency, encapsulated this Progressive spirit with his commitment to democracy, human rights, and multilateralism, and was viewed optimistically by most of Latin America because of it. If we accept that Obama falls within Cingranelli’s Progressive typology, it then follows that his initial decision to isolate Honduras’ coup government was based on his own internalized sense of morality and its role in U.S. foreign policy. The claim that a constructivist-informed approach guided U.S. policy towards Honduras in this period holds true; however, the U.S. was heading towards a pivot towards a more neo-realist approach.

### Phase Two

This phase marks the beginning of sustained international criticism of the U.S.’ policy on Honduras. While the U.S. was still seen as supporting Zelaya during this period, its relative silence on human rights violations and failure to take some of the steps that other states had taken – namely, removing their ambassador and imposing trade sanctions – garnered criticism and suspicion from observers who suspected the U.S. was not genuine in supporting Zelaya. This is also the period that sets up the about-face towards recognizing Micheletti’s elections, as Republican congressmen began to put substantial pressure on the administration to support the de facto government. If there is any phase where the clash between interests and ideals is at its strongest, it is this one.

Many journalists sensed this clash; one article claimed that “Obama [was] finding it difficult to resist the pressure of the U.S. right wing in the corporations and the military not to oppose the coup beyond lip service to legality”<sup>144</sup> while another accused the Obama

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Luis V. Teodoro. "Return of the Caudillo."

Administration of being no more supportive of democracy in Latin America than his predecessor George W. Bush, saying: “The difference between what would have been the Bush position and Obama’s is a difference of strategy rather than purpose. The Obama policy is not, at the moment, focused on remaking the world in the U.S. image, but in achieving the same results via the less costly paths of dialogue and diplomacy.”<sup>145</sup>

Some of the criticisms and accusations leveled against the U.S. in this phase are especially interesting in that they almost explicitly accuse the U.S. of following a neo-realist approach that ignores human rights in favor of national interest. One editorial in the *Guardian*, which accuses Obama of “sitting on his hands” in regards to human rights violations, reads:

If [Honduras] were in another part of the world – or if it were, say, Iran or Burma – the global reaction to its current plight would be very different. Right now, in the heart of what the United States traditionally regarded as its backyard, thousands of pro-democracy activists are risking their lives to reverse the coup that ousted the country’s elected president... The reality is that Honduras is a weak vessel on the progressive wave that has swept Latin America over the past decade, challenging U.S. domination and the Washington consensus, breaking the grip of entrenched elites and attacking social and racial inequality. While the imperial giant has been tied down with the war on terror, the continent has used that window of opportunity to assert its collective independence in an emerging multipolar world. It’s scarcely surprising that the process is regarded as threatening by U.S. interests...<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Luis V. Teodoro. "Vantage Point: Be Careful What You Wish For." *BusinessWorld*, July 24, 2009.

<sup>146</sup> Seumas Milne. "The Honduras Coup is a Sign: The Radical Tide Can be Turned." *The Guardian*, August 12, 2009.

It is perhaps ironic that this commentator uses the language of realism – ‘multipolar,’ ‘interests,’ etc. – to advance what is essentially a constructivist interpretation of international relations. The writer is accusing the U.S. of guiding its foreign policy based on containing Latin America’s ‘progressive wave’ through preserving elite rule and preventing the spread of ‘*chavismo*,’ and frames this decision as the opposite of the U.S. *should* be doing according to the international community’s expectation of human rights and democracy promotion. In essence, the author takes a constructivist argument by assuming that there are what constructivist theory calls “norms and ideas in international life”<sup>147</sup> and that the U.S. was violating those norms by choosing interests over ideals. However, I find this narrative reductive in that it simplifies all of the U.S.’ actions down to an attempt to appease the international community by pretending to support Zelaya while secretly supporting the coup.

Instead, the analytical framework that I find most helpful in analyzing the U.S.’ actions and statements during this period comes from Kathryn Sikkink’s *Mixed Signals*. Sikkink’s fundamental argument is that mixed signals<sup>148</sup> from the U.S. government led authoritarian leaders in Latin America during its period of dictatorships to believe, rightly or otherwise, that the U.S. supported them and did not condemn the human rights violations they were committing. Mixed signals can be contradictory statements, such as the president saying one thing and the secretary of state saying another, or ambiguous ones, such as an administration’s silence on an issue that other countries have spoken out against.<sup>149</sup> In Latin America specifically, “where the United States has a powerful influence, ambiguous or contradictory messages from the United States can block the spiral of human rights change. When U.S. policy makers give a green light for repression, they may at least temporarily trump other human rights messages and short-circuit

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<sup>147</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 119.

<sup>148</sup> Also known as red light/green light.

<sup>149</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America*, 79.

the spiral.”<sup>150</sup> This argument rests on the assumption that “policy makers are never fully rational calculators; they are groups with interests and identities trying to interpret often contradictory messages.”<sup>151</sup> The same message from the U.S. – for instance, that the U.S. says it supports democracy in Honduras, can be interpreted differently by different decision makers; for example, hard-liners in the Micheletti government might construe this as approval from the U.S. for getting rid of Zelaya, while Zelaya himself would interpret this same message as unequivocal support for returning him to power.

The Honduras coup is a solid example of how mixed signals from the U.S. contributed to human rights violations in Latin America. The contrast between the Obama Administration and congressional Republicans’ actions in this phase illustrate how the de facto regime received contradictory messages from the U.S. government, especially around October 2009 when Senator DeMint’s delegation visited Micheletti in Tegucigalpa. Interestingly, DeMint’s interaction with the Honduran de facto regime mirrors Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s interactions with the military dictatorship of Argentina in the 1970’s. Both DeMint and Kissinger had made public statements supporting human rights – in DeMint’s case, he urged the Micheletti government to restore civil liberties while Henry Kissinger made a speech at the Organization of American States on the value of human rights<sup>152</sup> - while simultaneously supporting governments who were clear, proven violators of human rights. While we now know that Kissinger privately gave a “green light” to human rights violations to the Argentine military dictatorship, to use just one example, by telling to them to get the “war on terrorism”<sup>153</sup> over with quickly, we have no evidence that DeMint gave any such message to the Micheletti government, although the effect

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>152</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America*, 111.

<sup>153</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 216.

was basically the same.<sup>154</sup> As far as messages of ambiguity, Obama and Clinton's silence on human rights violations in a time where such violations were clearly happening was undoubtedly an ambiguous message that the Honduran government most likely interpreted as a 'green light.'

How, then, to characterize this phase according to international relations theory? This is the most difficult phase to classify because there are several competing narratives on its events. Realists would perhaps say that Republicans in Congress put pressure on the Obama Administration to act in the U.S.' best interests by reversing its stance on the coup and ensuring U.S. military and economic interests in Honduras. Constructivists might interpret Republican support for the coup government as a vestige of Cold War-era anticommunist thought that led them to value the preservation of pro-U.S. forces in Central America more than international norms. In this phase, it is most accurate to say that it was a clash between a realist and an ideational foreign policy, coming from different areas of the U.S. government, that drove U.S. action during this period and created the mixed signals it sent to the Honduran regime.

### Phase Three

Perception towards the U.S. in phase three becomes almost uniformly negative after the U.S. changed course and declared they would recognize the election as legitimate. The abstract of one article called "Trampling on Honduran democracy" read: "The election in Honduras has the blessing of the U.S., but not the people, their president or the rest of the world."<sup>155</sup> The writer of this piece, journalist Calvin Tucker, accused Hillary Clinton of "[selling] out Honduran democracy"<sup>156</sup> by making a deal to recognize the elections in exchange for congressional

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<sup>154</sup> The "effect" being no discernible improvement on human rights violations, despite Micheletti's promise to end the emergency decree limiting civil liberties.

<sup>155</sup> Calvin Tucker. "Trampling on Honduran Democracy."

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

Republicans approving some of the Obama Administration's State Department appointees. He also claimed that, once confronted with such a deal by Senator DeMint, "Clinton, never a fan of leftwing Latin American leaders, was happy to acquiesce."<sup>157</sup>

The historical memory of U.S.-Latin American relations referenced earlier in the case study was brought back from a different angle during this phase. One source claimed that "as a result [of the U.S. changing its mind], the historic Latin American mistrust of the U.S. was reinforced after a brief period in which it seemed that President Obama would erase George W. Bush's legacy of neglect, bullying and ignorance."<sup>158</sup> Additionally, human rights violations persisted in Honduras and were met with silence or mixed signals from the Obama Administration. Latin America's optimism for a new era of U.S.-Latin American relations under the Obama Administration was effectively dead.

This phase is the strongest example of a realist philosophy guiding U.S. foreign policy; however, this is not to say that the U.S. completely abandoned its human rights policy or that it never had one the whole time. Lars Schoultz in his foundational work, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, describes how human rights considerations are merely one among a range of variables affecting a decision:

It should be noted at the outset that while some administrations clearly place greater emphasis than others upon the promotion of human rights, in no case has a commitment to increase the importance of human rights considerations in foreign policy been to deny the legitimacy of other competing values. Thus the importance of human rights is always a function of the other potential interests and values that impinge upon any given policy

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Albor Ruiz. "A Honduras Coup, & No One Notices." *Daily News* (New York), December 3, 2009.

decision. In all administrations, the question policy makers address is not whether to incorporate human rights into the decision-making process but rather how much influence human rights should have in relation to a host of other potentially conflicting variables.<sup>159</sup>

Writing in 1981, Schoultz probably had the contrast between Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in mind; however, the argument applies equally well to the Obama Administration in 2009. As Schoultz says, “The question is not human rights versus no human rights; instead it is human rights versus national security versus friendly relations with existing regimes versus economic benefits to the domestic economy versus humanitarian aid to impoverished people.”<sup>160</sup> This sentence is the most succinct way to describe the clash between interests and ideals, and it can easily be applied to U.S. policy after the Honduras coup. To use Schoultz’ framework, the question was not democracy and human rights in Honduras versus no democracy and no human rights; instead it was these ideals versus maintaining U.S. troops at the Soto Cano Air Base versus keeping a friendly regime in Central America versus maintaining favorable trade with Honduras<sup>161</sup> versus maintaining humanitarian aid for people in the poorest country in Central America. The reason this phase is classified as being guided by a neo-realist philosophy is because the material benefits of recognizing the new Honduran government apparently outweighed the ideational elements in the decision.

This is not to absolve the United States of any responsibility for its actions in Honduras; it is undeniable that the Obama Administration, in the end, sided with a human rights-violating,

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<sup>159</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America*, 109.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 109, 110.

<sup>161</sup> Though the economic consequences of suspending trade with a country the size of Ohio may not seem as large a variable as the others, the United States also had an economic interest in stemming the drug trade that flows through Honduras on its way to the U.S. border.

quasi-legal government whose actions led Honduras down an even darker path of crime and instability that continues to this day. It is merely to say that its decision ultimately was informed by a neorealist emphasis on national security and maintaining a friendly regime in America's so-called 'backyard.'

### Typologies

The historical record indicates that there was a pivot from an ideational approach to a more neorealist emphasis on material interests, making it difficult to categorize the coup as fitting neatly within one of three typologies of neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism. However, it is helpful to compare the record against each of the ideal theoretical accounts of the coup and see how they differ. I have created three typologies of what a strict interpretation of each theory would predict in the Honduras case.

Neorealist theory would predict that the U.S. would recognize that Zelaya was a threat in that he was turning Honduras – a traditionally U.S.-allied, centrally located Central American country that housed U.S. troops at their air base – into a left-wing populist state like Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. Allowing Honduras to become an anti-American leftist force in Central America could encourage even more Latin American countries to join this progressive tide. Additionally, a friendly Honduras is important for the U.S. because it is an important site for anti-narcotics efforts in Central America as well as a trading partner that supplies goods such as fruit and coffee. In order to protect U.S. political and economic interests, the U.S. would support the military government and prevent Zelaya's return to office.

This typology, which illustrates how the U.S. would respond to the coup according to an ideal realist philosophy, is useful in explaining the U.S.' eventual recognition of the new Honduras government but not its initial efforts to restore Zelaya. If U.S. policy had been driven by this approach from the beginning of the crisis, then there would have been no point to condemning the coup, negotiating Zelaya's return, and suspending aid to Honduras. Yet, the interests are clear; the U.S. did have an identifiable military and economic interest in supporting the coup, yet did so only after initially attempting to restore Zelaya to office. Though the outcome of the coup may have been basically the same if the U.S. had taken a realist approach from the beginning, the fact that they did not shows that there is another theoretical background informing foreign policy at this time as well.

The typology for neoliberalism, as well as the theory itself, has been relatively neglected in this paper because of its similarity to realist theory in its emphasis on material interests and assumption of rationality in state actions, as well as the fact that different interpretations of the theory could lead to different predictions of the coup:

Neoliberalism's prediction depends on who is considered the greater enemy to democracy and the free market in Latin America: Zelaya or the coup government. If it is the former, as many conservatives argued, then preventing a populist leftist regime in Central America is crucial to maintaining democracy and capitalism in the Western Hemisphere; an ideal neoliberalism, then, would support the coup government and work to grant it international legitimacy. However, the argument could also go in the other direction. If the coup government is seen as an attack on constitutional democracy and human rights, as many liberal writers argued, then the U.S. will renounce the coup and

demand Zelaya's return in order to preserve democracy and free trade in the region, and to discourage other Latin American states from abandoning democracy. The U.S. has a material and moral interest in preserving democracy and cooperating with international law.

The ambiguity of the situation here makes this typology difficult, but it is nonetheless helpful in analyzing U.S. foreign policy. The first argument, that preventing Honduras from becoming 'chavista' is more beneficial to democracy and free trade in the hemisphere than allowing Zelaya to return to office, does seem to be the basis for the U.S.' rationale of recognizing the new elections as legitimate. Furthermore, the U.S. did work to grant Honduras international legitimacy after the new elections. However, the second argument – that it is mutually beneficial for everyone in the hemisphere to preserve democracy, seems to be the motivation for condemning the coup in the first place. Neoliberalism is the most difficult typology to analyze in this case because of the ambiguity of the situation and the different forms it could take.

Lastly, the constructivist typology takes an ideational approach to the U.S. response, rather than the material approach that realism and liberalism take:

Constructivist theory would predict that in the Honduras case, Barack Obama's stated commitment to democracy and human rights indicates that he – and by extension, his administration – has internalized international norms of democracy and human rights promotion, and therefore sees the U.S. as responsible for helping uphold these ideals in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, his criticisms of his predecessor George W. Bush's foreign policy indicate that he sees the U.S.' relationship with the rest of the

world, but particularly Latin America, differently than the previous president. With the 'dark days' of Yankee imperialism in Latin America in mind, Obama will seek to restore Zelaya and isolate the coup regime, as well as condemn human rights violations.

This typology explains much of the U.S.' initial reaction to the coup. As already illustrated, it was rather clear that the U.S. had a material interest in supporting the coup government, just as George W. Bush's Administration did when he supported the attempted coup against Hugo Chavez in 2002. However, in this case it was ideas and international norms that restrained those interests and made the administration condemn the coup and support Zelaya's return. However, the initial phases of the coup do not exactly line with up the constructivist typology because Obama, seemingly for strategic purposes, did not meet with Zelaya or openly condemn human rights violations. Also, the constructivist model clearly fails to explain events in Phase 3, after the U.S. had legitimized the coup government.

### Conclusions and Implications

My case study has established that in the clash between interests and ideals in U.S. foreign policy decision-making, material interests eventually gained supremacy over ideas of democracy and human rights in Honduras. These material interests can be most succinctly characterized as the direct and indirect benefits of having a pro-U.S. government in Honduras: continued U.S. trade with the country, halting anti-American sentiment from spreading in Central America, and preserving U.S. military presence at the Soto Cano Air Base, which the U.S. saw as necessary for combating the drug trade on its way through Central America.

Rather than perfectly fitting one of the three typologies of international relations theory, the U.S. response to the coup indicates that its foreign policy during this time was guided by a combination of a constructivist approach based on international norms and a realist consideration of national security and economic benefit. Ultimately, it was political pressure from conservative elements of the U.S. government that seemed to push the Obama Administration towards accepting the coup government as legitimate. The case study also showed that it was U.S. recognition that legitimized the coup government and prevented Zelaya's return to office, rendering all of the OAS and international community's efforts moot.

There is an argument to be made that the U.S.' shift from opposing to tacitly supporting the coup was not a shift from ideational to material foreign policy but rather a shift from one ideological framework (supporting democracy and condemning coups) to another (protecting free trade and preventing the spread of *chavismo*). However, I do not consider the Obama Administration's shift to be ideological because the historical record shows that the administration acted according to internalized norms of democracy and human rights in the first phase of the coup. To say that their shift was also based on an ideational approach, albeit a different or even opposite one, would be to assume that decision-makers in the administration then somehow reversed their internalized notions of democracy and human rights. Instead, I argue that the Obama Administration's shift in policy was a conscious decision – brought about by political pressure – to choose 'objective' material interests over their own internalized norms, rather than merely a shift from one ideology to another.

Although the constructivist model of international relations theory is useful in explaining and justifying why states engage in human rights-promoting behavior, it cannot account for why the U.S. reneged on its commitment to Zelaya's return to Honduras. Accordingly, this case might

benefit from a bureaucratic political approach centered on the political maneuvering between Secretary Clinton and Senator DeMint. I also believe that neorealist theory also has something to offer in the debate on democracy and human rights in inter-American affairs. To use the language of realism, the Western Hemisphere operates under a unipolar system,<sup>162</sup> with the U.S. as the hegemon; this explains why U.S. foreign policy was the key factor in the coup government's survival. Operating under such a system, the inter-American human rights regime will ultimately be subject to the U.S.' wishes in the case of coups d'état or other threats to democracy and human rights in the hemisphere. This explains why the U.S. has contributed to democracy and human rights promotion in the Western Hemisphere in some cases, and done the opposite in others, such as Honduras. The democratic charter draws power from its moral authority, but it is not enough to constrain the U.S. from acting in its own strategic and material interests.

This does not bode well for democracy consolidation in Latin America. The OAS democratic charter only works if all American states, but especially the U.S., enforce it to the highest degree. Anything less than a unified, sustained commitment to democracy and human rights from every member of the alliance will result in vulnerable democracies and rampant human rights violations in the hemisphere, as it did in Honduras. This is not to say, as many sources in the data predicted, that a coup in one Latin American country will lead to a domino effect that topples every democratic government in the region; this did not happen after Honduras, and it is unlikely to happen elsewhere in Latin America. Yet, the conservative forces in Latin America that seek to guard their countries from progressive forces of democratic and social reform will be emboldened to continue executing coups d'état as long as they believe the

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<sup>162</sup> Whether or not the world as a whole still operates under a unipolar system with the U.S. at the top is another debate entirely.

U.S. will either outright support them, or at least not take any serious action against them. In this system, the democratic charter is doomed to fail.

Eight years after the Honduras coup, two contemporary examples illustrate the relative weakness of democracy consolidation in Latin America: Paraguay and Venezuela. Both cases directly echo the crisis in Honduras in that the presidents of both countries are currently attempting, directly or indirectly, to extend their term while silencing political opposition. In Paraguay, President Horacio Cartes has “moved to amend the constitution to allow him to be re-elected in 2018” despite 77% of Paraguayans seeing such a move as unconstitutional,<sup>163</sup> raising fears that the country is “once again sliding towards dictatorship.”<sup>164</sup> Meanwhile in Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro has eroded democratic institutions<sup>165</sup> and silenced political opposition while his country experiences an economic and humanitarian crisis.<sup>166</sup>

These developments, with Honduras included, demonstrate the weakness of democracy consolidation in the region and challenge the notion that 21<sup>st</sup>-century Latin America has left dictatorships and coups d'état behind. If the region wants to create a strong, effective inter-American system of democracy and human rights promotion, it will have to strengthen the Organization of American States' influence not only in reversing attacks on democracy but in preventing them as well. As the case study shows, Latin America will also have to find a way

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<sup>163</sup> "Un 77 % de los paraguayos ve inconstitucional una enmienda para permitir la reelección," *Agencia EFE*, [www.efe.com](http://www.efe.com), February 26, 2017, accessed April 14, 2017.

<sup>164</sup> Laurence Blair. "Paraguay fears dictatorship as president moves to amend constitution." *The Guardian*. March 30, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/30/paraguay-reelection-amend-constitution-horacio-cartes>.

<sup>165</sup> Nicholas Casey and Patricia Torres. "El Tribunal Supremo de Venezuela asume los poderes del congreso y la oposición canta golpe de Estado." *The New York Times*. March 30, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2017/03/30/el-tribunal-supremo-de-venezuela-asume-los-poderes-del-congreso-y-la-oposicion-canta-golpe-de-estado/?action=click&contentCollection=Americas&module=Translations@ion=Header&version=es-LA&ref=en-US&pgtype=article>.

<sup>166</sup> Abraham F Lowenthal. "Can the World Help Venezuela Save Itself?" *The New York Times*. April 07, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/opinion/can-the-world-help-venezuela-save-itself.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/opinion/can-the-world-help-venezuela-save-itself.html?_r=0).

around U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere, in case the U.S. decides once again to prioritize interests over ideas and continue to support anti-democratic forces. Whether this comes as Latin American countries such as Brazil grow enough to counter U.S. influence or if further institutional constraints are put into place to strengthen the inter-American system, the region cannot count on the United States not to do so, especially with a president opposed to practically all multilateral diplomatic efforts.<sup>167</sup>

Until such a system is created, Latin America will be susceptible to coups d'état and authoritarian advances. Human rights violations will continue to occur in these situations, and activists such as Berta Cáceres will continue to lose their lives as a result. In the clash between interests and ideas in U.S. foreign policy, Latin America cannot be sure that the former will not supersede the latter.

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<sup>167</sup> For more on President Trump's opposition to multilateralism and its implications for Latin America, see: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/opinion/venezuelan-democracy-needs-the-hemispheres-help.html?\\_r=0&module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Opinion&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=article/](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/opinion/venezuelan-democracy-needs-the-hemispheres-help.html?_r=0&module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Opinion&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=article/)

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