

[Modernization as an Ideology]: [An analysis of the relationship between Modernization theory and US foreign relations during the 1960s], [1961-1963].

How did Modernization Theory influence US foreign relations during the Kennedy administration?

Name: Derron Yu

Sources Analyzed:

Primary:

1. “1961 State of the Union Address” by John F. Kennedy;
2. “1960 Essay to White House” by John F. Kennedy;
3. “Memorandum From the Special Consultant for Counterinsurgency to the Acting Director of the Mission”;
4. “The Five Stages to Modernization” by W.W. Rostow;

Secondary:

5. “Modernization as Ideology” by Michael Latham;
6. “The Great American Mission Modernization and Construction of an American World Order” by David Ekbladh;
7. “Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations” by Frank Costigliola and Michael J Hogan;
8. “Mandarins of the Future” by Nils Gilman;
9. “John F. Kennedy: Person, Policy, Presidency” by John Richard Snyder;
10. "Musical Modernization: The King & I" by Christina Klein;
11. “Ideology as Strategy: Military-Led Modernization and the Origins of the Alliance for Progress in Bolivia” by Thomas C. Field.

Throughout the 35th President of the United States' time in office, John F Kennedy's administration faced a multitude of complex issues, both domestic and foreign. From navigating the Cuban Missile Crisis to managing Cold War tensions, Kennedy's time in office was also notable for bold proposals to contain Communist expansion in Asia, focusing on ensuring rapid economic progress in "Third World" developing countries. For instance, the Alliance for Progress aimed to promote human rights and improve economic cooperation between the US and Latin America. Kennedy also made strides to develop a Strategic Hamlet Program to address the growing communist insurgency through the pacification of the countryside. Finally, Kennedy's establishment of the Peace Corps, a volunteer-based program for young college graduates, both fit in with his campaign promises of self-sacrifice and was a prominent solution to redefining US relations with developing countries. This essay will contend that these programs and other key US foreign relations policies were influenced by a growing set of social science theories, none more prominent than modernization theory. By analyzing the development of modernization theory, relevant work on the topic by 20th-century scholars, and various primary and secondary sources, this essay will argue that implicit ideological, political and economic characteristics regarding modernization theory had a direct impact on mid-20th century US foreign relations.

First originated from German sociologist Max Weber and later developed by Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons, modernization theory examines the internal factors of a country to explain the process of modernization within societies¹. Among other features, the theory assumes

¹ Wolfgang, Knöbl, "Theories That Won't Pass Away: The Never-ending Story," *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, (2003), Accessed August 8, 2020, pp. 96-97

that with assistance, "traditional"² countries can reach the same level of progress as developed countries. Modernization theory also seeks to explain social evolution through various economic, political and cultural dimensions³.

Historians have differing views on the relationship and the impact of modernization theory on US foreign relations. In "Modernization as Ideology," author Michael Latham believes that ideology is the motivating factor behind US foreign policy decisions and the focus of a growing liberal capitalist movement⁴. Latham also contends that modernization theory reflects older ideologies of Manifest Destiny⁵. While Latham analyzes modernization theory from a political and economic context, scholars Dennis Merrill and Thomas Paterson relate the impact of modernization theory to imperialism in the late nineteenth century from a racial context. In "Major Problems in American Foreign Relations," Merrill and Peterson claim that more traditional, non-white societies were "hopelessly and helplessly"⁶ destined to trail that of the modern, white world. They contended the only way for these cultures to develop was through assistance and the insertion of Western ideas, in essence claiming that modernization was entirely contingent on White leadership and supremacy⁷. In addition to modernization theory, other schools of thought regarding social science also developed to address the change in US foreign policy. For instance, sociologist

² Knöbl, "Theories That Won't Pass Away", pp. 96-97

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Accessed August 8, 2020, pp 1-5.

⁵ Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, pp. 1-5

⁶ Dennis Merrill, Thomas G. Paterson. *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (Belmont: Cengage, 2010), Accessed August 8, 2020, pp. 18-19

⁷ Merrill, Paterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, pp. 18-19

Immanuel Wallerstein was notable for his "world-systems theory,"⁸ which focussed on the convergence on a liberal, capitalist future through its "developmental teleology of upward mobility."⁹ Wallerstein was adamant that the capitalist world market was driven by a consistent, cyclical pattern of expansion and incorporation¹⁰.

Throughout his presidency, Kennedy relied on a close, highly educated circle of academics and policy-makers, such as economist W.W. Rostow and outsider John Galbraith, to push his agenda of rapid economic development. In doing so, Kennedy accepted and applied implicit ideologies regarding modernization to US foreign policy. For instance, As Frank Costigliola and Michael J Hogan contend in "Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations," Kennedy and his advisors believed, above all else, that their programs reflect a sense of altruism and benevolence¹¹. Nonetheless, they also thought that the United States had an obligation, as the most modern country in the world, to promote their ideas to the Third World. The establishment of Kennedy's administration during the early 1960s was conjunct with a drastic increase in non-state actors, including social scientists, universities and philanthropic organizations¹². These groups sought to extend the "American way of life"¹³ to nationalist regimes in the Third World that was significantly different in terms of political and ideological beliefs. They stressed the ap-

⁸ Paul Halsall, "Modern History Sourcebook: Summary of Wallerstein on World System Theory", 21 January 2020, Accessed August 8, 2020, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/wallerstein.asp>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Frank Costigliola, Michael J Hogan, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Accessed August 6, 2020, pp. 33-34

¹² Costigliola, Hogan, *Explaining History*, pp. 33-34

¹³ Ibid.

plication of "development aid, technical assistance, foreign investment, and integrated planning"¹⁴ to convert traditional societies into liberal, democratic and capitalist ways of life familiar to them. As undersecretary of state George Ball recalls in his memoir "The Ball Doctrine," the rise in development economics in 1961 coincided with the swarming of professors into Washington, committed to the ideals of self-sustaining growth and nation-building¹⁵. The Kennedy administration's reliance on such actors meant that modernization theory supplied not only the design framework but also the final justification for programs such as the creation of the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress in Latin America, and the Strategic Hamlet program in Vietnam.

Various primary sources can be analyzed to reinforce the argument. President Kennedy's "State of the Union"¹⁶ address in 1961 (the year he was sworn into office), for instance, would let the world know that economic and international development was a priority for his administration. Kennedy's emphasis on seeing the rise of modernization in Third World countries can also be reflected in his address. For instance, his intention to establish a more effective program to "assist the economic, educational and social development"¹⁷ of other countries, was also announced parallel to his announcement of the Alliance for Progress program. This program envi-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dennis Ball, *The Ball Doctrine: Creating Peace & Prosperity in Every Nation* (New York: Createspace, 2003), Accessed August 9, 2020, pp. 10-11

¹⁶ John F Kennedy, "State of the Union Address", August 10, 2020, Accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHA/1961/JFKWHA-006/JFKWHA-006>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

sioned a "free and prosperous"¹⁸ Latin America, combined with a level of social and economic development that matched their historical contributions of "culture, intellect and liberty."¹⁹

We can also infer the growing influence of modernization theory on US foreign policy through a 1960 essay by then-senator Kennedy, directed towards the White House. The soon-to-be President harshly criticized the government for having diminished American power. In relaying that it was "the American people, who should be marching at the head of this world-wide revolution,"²⁰ Kennedy condemned foreign Communist leadership that had forced various Third World countries into an ideological struggle. Arguing that it was the Communists that had portrayed themselves as a "vanguard force"²¹ towards a better way of life, Kennedy's sentiment towards Communism would foreshadow his administration's belief that to create a truly free society, they had no choice other than to reduce totalitarian regimes, command economics and other forms of state-planning²² that would eventually disrupt the United State's systems and ways of life.

The anti-communist ideology that the Kennedy administration utilized in their foreign policy is also apparent in Rostow's "Five Stages to Modernization." In rationalizing that no con-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 176

²¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 176

²² Ibid.

trolled economics were in an "era of high-mass consumption,"²³ Rostow's model was severely biased towards a western model of modernization. Instrumental to his theory was the argument that only American intervention would propel a country from the second stage of "pre-conditions for take-off"²⁴ to take-off itself. Rostow's model was also shaped by the belief that through an energized middle class, a country would eventually establish civil liberties, a political system based on democracy, and the institutionalization of human rights²⁵. In effect, Rostow's theory of modernization was the driving force behind comprehensive aid programs throughout the Third World. Concurrently, by viewing Communism as "a disease of the transition,"²⁶ it is evident that Rostow's beliefs greatly influenced the administration in the broader context of the Cold War, inciting increased anti-communist foreign policy and reinforcement of capitalist economic expansion in developing regions. However, it needs to be noted that Rostow was just one of several modernization theorists that portrayed Communism and communist ideologies in a negative light. As Nils Gilman summarizes in "Mandarins of the Future," modernization theory described Communism as both a "pathological and deviant"²⁷ form of modernity. "Eschatological prophecies"²⁸ of a Communist utopia expressed by classical Marxists was contrasted with the notion by modernization theorists that this utopia could already be found in western societies such as

²³ W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Accessed August 5, 2020, pp. 162-165

²⁴ Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, pp. 162-165

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nils, Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), Accessed August 9, 2020, pp. 155-160

²⁸ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, pp. 155-160

America. Claiming their anti-Communist credentials, several theorists quickly claimed that their theories would help the battle between a monolithic Communism and a pluralist "free world."²⁹ These individuals carried an inherent belief that the entire global system was destined to converge and adapt to their modernization models.

Through Rostow and other theorists, various programs and policies were created that reflected the Kennedy administration's influence on modernization. For instance, As historian David Ekbladh describes in the book "The Great American Mission," the creation of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1961 was committed to economic growth through a more liberal approach to modernization³⁰. By bringing together, foreign aid bureaucracies in a separate, independent body that would handle all matters concerning development aid, the newly formed organization could also realize any ulterior objectives the US government desired. The USAID resulted in the Peace Corps' formation, another independent agency that focused on volunteer-based, international, developmental assistance. The Peace Corps institutionalized a belief that exposure to modernized personalities, such as "representative Americans"³¹ rather than specialists, would be able to communicate values more effectively.

One of the other points of emphasis behind modernization theory was the idea of counter-revolutionary thought. As author John Snyder relays in "Kennedy: Person, Policy, Presidency," to

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization & the Construction of an American World Order*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Accessed August 6, 2020, pp. 179-182

³¹ Ekbladh, David, *The Great American Mission*, pp. 179-182

prevent flirtations with "violent revolution, radicalism or communism,"³² the US government committed to helping developing countries with economic stability and political maturity. Counterrevolutionary thought dominated the Kennedy administration. It was realized in the form of the Peace Corps program, as well as intelligence officers, teachers and other actors that aimed to remake a country to the ideal "American image"³³ through modernization. This counterrevolutionary thought was also utilized to advance Kennedy's aggressive confrontation of insurgent and Communist ideas in Third World countries. As noted in scholar Thoms C. Field Jr's work in "Ideology as Strategy," to capitalize on various Bolivian leaders' interest in modernization, the administration utilized a variety of apolitical development theories, for political ends³⁴. Despite the failure to employ developmental policies, US foreign policy was still able to successfully decommunize the Bolivian revolution through militarized intervention³⁵. Furthermore, Ekbladh describes how the Alliance for Progress program sought to counter the threat of "Castroism" in Latin America through American-sponsored development serving as a distraction from the possibility of revolution³⁶. Fidel Castro's "Marxist shuttle to prosperity"³⁷ served as a significant threat to the Kennedy administration, who feared that Castro's actions would push Latin American countries away from a potential government based on liberalist principles. Though the program

³² John R Snyder, *John F Kennedy: Person, Policy Presidency*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1988), Accessed August 9, 2020, pp. 59-60

³³ Snyder, *John F Kennedy*, pp. 59-60

³⁴ Thomas C Field Jr., "Ideology as Strategy: Military-Led Modernization and the Origins of the Alliance for Progress in Bolivia", 19 January 2012, Accessed August 5, 2020, *Diplomatic History, Volume 36, Issue 1*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01013.x>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ekbladh, David, *The Great American Mission*, pp. 181-182

³⁷ Ibid.

was filled with beneficial economic clauses, such as a fairer distribution of income, the improvement of social capital and the increase in investment rates, follow-on effects failed to materialize³⁸. The program resulted in a net loss of over \$20 billion in aid³⁹.

The influence of anti-communist sentiment in modernization theory can also be seen in planning for the Strategic Hamlet Program. The program, which aimed to increase loyalty by the Vietnamese peasantry towards their government, promised to build newly formed, "protected hamlets."⁴⁰ It was in the hope that through pacification, protection and financial support that these peasants would be more susceptible to modernist governmental legislation. However, the program was a complete failure, indirectly resulting in the rise of the Viet Cong and alienating local Vietnamese citizens⁴¹. In a Memorandum from the Special Consultant for Counterinsurgency, CIA operative Rufus Phillips to the Acting Director of the Mission, William Flippin, Phillips admitted to viewing the strategic hamlets "as a means to defeat communism."⁴² In reaffirming the need to impose democracy as the dominant political system, Phillips's opinion reflected a national, anti-communist sentiment that was disguised by the need to "overcome the problems of an underdeveloped country."⁴³ Further allegations of lethargic leadership from

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Spencer Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Accessed August 9, 2020, pp. 535-536

⁴¹ Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, pp. 535-536

⁴² US Department of History, "227. *Memorandum From the Special Consultant for Counterinsurgency, United States Operation Mission (Phillips) to the Acting Director of the Mission (Flippin)*", Office of the Historian, Saigon, June 25, 1962, Accessed August 7, 2020

⁴³ Ibid.

Phillips and corruption in Vietnam reinforced the notion that the US government sought to undermine the political status quo with a democratic, capitalist system.

In addition, author Christina Klein describes how a distinct cultural moment in which Americans turned their attention eastward reflected a growing sense of modernity through her analysis of the musical "The King and I." Between 1945 and 1961, Klein notes an increase in stories by American cultural producers (both fiction and non-fiction) that primarily focussed on Asia and the Pacific as the topic in question⁴⁴. Like other historians on the subject of modernization theory, Klein relays how these theorists believed the United States to be the modern state, and a model for developing nations to emulate⁴⁵. Through her analysis of the musical, Klein demonstrates how one of the most prominent Western works of art in the mid-20th century showed a sense of sentimental modernization, revealing broader themes of democratization, the importance of the middle class, and anti-authoritarianism that is prevalent throughout modernization theory.

In conclusion, the relationship between modernization theory and US foreign relations in the 1960s can be analyzed from a multitude of perspectives. Modernization theory was utilized to solidify John F. Kennedy's emphasis on international and economic development through foreign policy, as evidenced by the creation of the Peace Corps and the USAID. His State of the Union address and thoughts on anti-communism pre-Presidency, however, also reveal that modernization theory was used as an aggressive policy tool to target Communism, shown through the

⁴⁴ Dennis Merrill, Thomas G. Paterson. *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (Belmont: Cengage, 2010), Accessed August 8, 2020, pp. 344-345

⁴⁵ Merrill, Paterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, pp. 344-345

inner workings of the Alliance for Progress program and the Strategic Hamlet Program. In analyzing the literature and from prominent theorists such as W.W Rostow, it is clear that modernization theory was, and still remains a complex, ever-evolving set of ideologies and beliefs. However, it is undeniable that the ideological, economic and political dimensions surrounding modernization theory had a profound effect on US foreign policy. Despite his assassination in 1963, by allowing himself and his administration to be influenced by modernization theory, Kennedy became one of the most influential figures of the 20th century and modern-day international relations.

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US Department of History, "227. *Memorandum From the Special Consultant for Counterinsurgency, United States Operation Mission (Phillips) to the Acting Director of the Mission (Fippin)*", Office of the Historian, Saigon, June 25, 1962.