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Introduction

AS THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE heated up in the summer of 1960, few politicians embodied the spirit of the moment so well as Frank Church. The Democrat had been elected Idaho's junior senator just four years earlier, handily defeating Republican incumbent Herman Welker, an old-school conservative known for fervent anticommunism. Church left no doubt of his own hostility to the Soviet Union. No viable contender for high office could have done otherwise at a time when anticommunism, even if it had cooled since the Red Scare of the early 1950s, remained an American preoccupation. But Church, like other liberals in his party, promised to wage the Cold War with greater subtlety, vision, and vigor than the Republicans had done in the Eisenhower years. Like his friend John F. Kennedy, the thirty-six-year-old Church exuded youthful vigor and intellect, precisely the qualities that Democrats were eager to contrast to Eisenhower's elderly torpor. And, like Kennedy, Church spoke passionately of the need for a fresh, activist brand of leadership prepared to mobilize the nation's prodigious power, wealth, and know-how to meet rapidly metastasizing challenges at home and abroad.

Church was especially concerned with the Cold War in regions variously called the "underdeveloped," "less-developed," or "third" world. Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America were, Church believed, undergoing an epoch-defining transformation that required Washington's urgent attention. Colonialism and other forms of oppression that ensured Western dominance over much of the globe appeared to be crumbling, and nonwhite peoples were asserting themselves in international affairs as never before. "The prevailing order of the last three centuries has been destroyed," Church declared in his keynote address at the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. Nothing less than the outcome of the Cold War seemed to hinge on whether the democratic West or the communist East responded more effectively. "These underdeveloped and uncommitted nations are the 'no-man's land' on which the destiny of the human race will be decided," Church told the convention delegates and a nationwide television audience. Castigating the

Republicans for propping up colonialism, coddling friendly dictators, and furnishing military equipment to help suppress popular demands for justice, the Idahoan promised that his party would do things differently. Under a Democratic administration, he pledged, the United States would work with, rather than against, the forces of progress; it would build democracy and craft ambitious programs not to equip authoritarians with the latest weaponry but to fill stomachs and fuel development.¹

A little more than a decade later, Church ruefully admitted that all of this—the grand aspirations to cultivate democracy, promote prosperity, and align the United States with the yearnings of people struggling against oppression—had come to nothing. “Ten years ago,” Church declared in a Senate speech on October 29, 1971, “the leaders of the United States—and to a lesser degree the American people—were filled with zeal about their global goals.” With “supreme confidence both in our power and capacity to make wise and effective use of it,” he added, Americans had proclaimed the dawning of a new era for the “impoverished masses of mankind.” Nonetheless, Church lamented, “we have not only failed to accomplish what we set out to accomplish ten years ago; we have been thrown for losses across the board.” The United States had watched as “free governments gave way to military dictatorships in country after country.” Worse, Church added, ten years of voluminous economic aid had failed to raise up impoverished nations, while disparities of wealth between rich elites and the masses in many nations had widened. Calling American aid programs a “proven failure,” Church urged that they be ended. The larger lesson he drew from this dismal record could hardly have contrasted more starkly with his optimism just a few years earlier. “Even with enormous power and the best of intentions,” he asserted, “there are some things we cannot do, things which are beyond our moral and intellectual resources.”²

Church’s two speeches neatly capture the trajectory of U.S. policymaking toward the Third World during the 1960s. In the first part of the decade, many Americans—not least their dynamic young president—joined Church in viewing the transformation of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America as their nation’s biggest foreign policy challenge and embraced the tasks of promoting political and economic change. “To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery,” Kennedy declared in his grandiloquent inaugural address, “we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required.”³ Committed to the quintessentially liberal idea that the nation’s power must be mobilized to solve problems at home and abroad, Kennedy aimed to pump resources into the Third World and promote political and economic change in areas that had seldom ranked very high in American priorities.

Within a few years, however, much of this energy and ambition had drained away. Enthusiasm for foreign aid dwindled, as did efforts to spread democracy. The election of 1968 signaled the collapse of the earlier vision, bringing to office a new president, Richard Nixon, who showed little interest in the transformation of poor nations. “For years, we in the United States have pursued the illusion that we alone could re-make continents,” Nixon declared in a speech on Halloween 1969. “We have sometimes imagined that we knew what was best for everyone else and that we could and should make it happen. Well, experience has taught us better.”⁴ Speaking privately with an aide, Nixon made clear where he wished to focus his efforts. “The only thing that matters in the world,” said the president, “is Japan, China, Russia, and Europe.”⁵ Nixon’s top foreign policy lieutenant, Henry Kissinger, felt the same way. “The Third World has not proved to be a decisive arena of great power conflict,” Kissinger wrote in 1969.⁶ Under what the media took to calling the Nixon Doctrine, Washington aimed merely to promote pro-American stability in the Third World, even if it meant bolstering unjust political and economic arrangements.

Why did American leaders reverse their approach to the Third World in such a short span of time? Answering this question promises to contribute new insight into U.S. history during one of the nation’s most tumultuous and consequential eras. Historians have long written of the sixties as a time when large numbers of Americans, inspired by a surging sense of moral purpose and technical know-how, worked to address their society’s abundant imperfections, including poverty, racism, materialism, and ignorance. Equally, the sixties stand out for the disappointments and divisiveness that engulfed much of this high-minded agenda in the latter half of the decade. Far less appreciated is how the trajectory of efforts to address problems within U.S. borders ran parallel to foreign policy. Exploring the history of decision making toward the Third World during the 1960s highlights continuities between America’s domestic and international experiences and contributes to a more complete understanding of the process by which American liberalism fractured and gave way to a new political era that took shape in the 1970s. The United States still commanded monumental power, but the 1960s clarified the limits on Americans’ ability to transform their own society or the wider world.

Appreciating the shift in U.S. foreign policy during the 1960s also helps to explain the broad contours of global history in the years since 1945. The Second World War accelerated the disintegration of colonial empires and energized nonwhite peoples of the world by weakening the imperial metropolises and stirring appeals to the principles of self-determination, human rights, and unfettered economic exchange. Old hierarchies persisted in some areas, but

starting in the late 1950s the independent nations of Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America asserted themselves as never before, while numerous colonial territories, especially in Africa, claimed their independence. This epoch-defining process—a watershed arguably more profound than either the start or the end of the Cold War—redrew the map of the world and confronted the great powers with a host of new challenges. The reaction of the United States, by far the world’s most powerful nation, to this revolution in global affairs was bound to shape both the way in which the process played out and the nature of the new international order that emerged.

In the early 1960s, American leaders such as Kennedy and Church responded to ferment in the Third World with determination, at least rhetorically, to reorient U.S. foreign policy toward winning the loyalty of emerging nations and integrating them into the American-led order that prevailed outside the communist bloc. Their inability to achieve those goals marked a singular failure of U.S. policy, with implications for international relations long after the Cold War ended. Rather than aligning the United States with bold sociopolitical change, Washington increasingly sought to bolster existing sources of stability, whether colonial regimes or postcolonial governments that promised to prioritize partnership with the West above other objectives. Following this course, the United States often tied itself to repressive political forces and alienated itself from governments that refused to toe the U.S. line.

American leaders lost opportunities to establish a world order more amenable to U.S. leadership over the long term—and perhaps more just and peaceful—than the one that came into being after the rush to independence and self-assertion that peaked in the 1960s. To be sure, this shift in American policy was hardly unreasonable or driven by malevolent designs. The turn away from dynamic engagement with the Third World made eminent sense amid the turmoil of those years and the staggering demands on U.S. resources from nations that often defied U.S. policy preferences. Still, with the benefit of hindsight, American decisions stand out for engendering doubts, both abroad and at home, about the morality of U.S. foreign policy and Washington’s claims to global leadership. Making sense of those doubts may help us appreciate the global position of the United States, so often vexed by tensions with poor nations of the Global South, in the later twentieth and even twenty-first centuries.

Given the pivotal importance of the Third World’s transformation during the 1960s and the American response to it, the contours of U.S. decision making have attracted surprisingly sparse analysis over the years. One reason is the paucity of U.S. documents until the 1990s and early twenty-first century, when the bulk of American records from the later 1960s became available to researchers. A second reason is a notable aversion among historians, including

those studying international affairs, to examine global trends and generalize about U.S. foreign policy. Such caution emerges at least in part from laudable concern that geographical breadth might come at the expense of appreciating distinctions between foreign societies and exaggerating the centrality of the United States. Accordingly, historians have usually focused on bilateral interactions between the United States and individual nations—a tendency that has yielded valuable insights and deeply researched studies on particular relationships but less analysis of global trends.⁷

Another reason for the lack of attention to American policymaking toward the Third World is the overwhelming amount of attention that one small part of it—Vietnam—has attracted. By one reckoning, the Vietnam War has been the subject of more than thirty thousand nonfiction books.⁸ This outpouring is surely justified by the war's momentous significance to the social, political, and cultural history of the United States, not to mention the larger international history of the twentieth century. But controversies about the war have distracted attention from other aspects of U.S. foreign policy that also had a great—perhaps greater—impact on the global position of the United States over the long run.⁹ The trajectories of Brazil, India, and other major countries of the Third World turned out to be at least as significant to American policymaking as the expansion of communism in Indochina. Even if the Vietnam War was the central geopolitical event of the 1960s, though, widening the geographical lens to examine what else was happening throughout the world reveals how the U.S. preoccupation with Vietnam affected Washington's relationships with other nations of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America—one of the few consequences of the war to remain largely unexamined.¹⁰

The End of Ambition takes up the challenge of examining U.S. policymaking toward the Third World in the 1960s, arguing that the Vietnam War played a crucial role in leading U.S. leaders to abandon their liberal preoccupations in favor of a more cautious approach aimed at ensuring stability. The war had this effect partly because it demanded so much of America's military and economic resources, making politicians and policymakers wary of assuming additional burdens and anxious to minimize risks in other areas of the world. As the war in Vietnam dragged on, mounting frustration sapped much of the confidence about development and democratization that informed American policymaking at the start of the decade. The war also undermined the liberal agenda by fueling sharp criticism of the United States in many parts of the Third World, making it difficult for sympathetic officials in Washington to defend generous policies toward areas that increasingly seemed to defy American desires. All of these trends grew more evident as the Johnson presidency advanced and came to a head in the Nixon years, when U.S. leaders explicitly turned away from the policies embraced a few years earlier.

Unquestionably, memoirists and scholars have contended over the years that the war left little time for other international challenges. LBJ's deputy secretary of state, George Ball, made the point deftly in his memoir, noting that U.S. leaders' obsession with Vietnam "progressively constricted their vision" everywhere else. "The metaphor I thought most apt," added Ball, "was that of a camera, focused sharply on a small object in the immediate foreground but with no depth of field, so that all other objects were fuzzy and obscure."¹¹ Scholars have tended to make the point more bluntly. Because of the Vietnam imbroglio, American policymaking toward other regions "ground to a virtual halt" by 1968, claims historian Thomas J. Noer.¹² Historian H. W. Brands agrees, asserting that by the end of his presidency LBJ had "given up on most of the world," while Stephen Graubard goes so far as to say that "after 1965, there was no United States foreign policy; there was only a Vietnam policy."¹³ This book is the first to examine such claims by exploring in detail how the preoccupation in Southeast Asia affected other American relationships in the Third World.

It is too simple, though, to argue that the war by itself caused the transformation that this study explains. At least three other developments would have driven significant change in U.S. policy even if no American troops had set foot in Southeast Asia. These developments—changes in American leadership, the rapidly shifting political landscape within the United States, and accelerating polarization in the Third World—were already visible by 1965, when Johnson dramatically escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and their course after that fateful year was not shaped solely by the war. Rather, the conflict in Vietnam acted as a powerful accelerant, energizing the other trends leading the United States to reappraise its foreign policies and ensuring that the total effect of those changes came to more than the sum of their individual potentials. The effect of the war on the liberal underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy thus ran in parallel to its impact on domestic affairs, where controversy over Vietnam intensified social and political upheaval that steadily eroded policy initiatives that had been embraced by a broad swath of Americans at the start of the sixties.

The first trend catalyzed by the war was the declining influence of U.S. policymakers sensitive to sociopolitical change in the Third World and the rise of others with far less interest in the issue. Understanding this pattern depends on appreciating the outlooks and decision-making styles of leaders at the pinnacle of the U.S. bureaucracy. This book offers fresh appraisals of the three presidents who, along with their senior aides, compose its core dramatis personae. It argues that John F. Kennedy genuinely sought to grasp the political and economic transformation playing out in much of the Third World and sincerely aspired to recast U.S. policy to swim with what he regarded as the

inevitable tide of history. But Kennedy, like the advisers who surrounded him, never settled on a coherent approach and left behind an inconsistent and even confusing record. For his part, LBJ lacked both Kennedy's interest in the Third World and his patience for debate about American policy. Although a committed reformer in the domestic arena, LBJ had no such impulse in the international domain. He abandoned much of JFK's agenda and, particularly as the Vietnam War became a major preoccupation, sought to ensure stability in the Third World in order to minimize distractions from his higher priorities. In this way, Johnson anticipated, more than scholars have acknowledged, the approach embraced by Nixon and Kissinger after they moved into the White House in January 1969. Indeed, this book argues that the Nixon administration did not so much conceive innovative policy departures, as both admirers and detractors have long credited it with doing, as articulate ideas that had been embraced during the Johnson years.¹⁴

This book thus highlights the predilections of individual presidents, underscoring how personal experiences and idiosyncrasies drove policy choices. The differences among the men in the Oval Office mattered a great deal. The book also, however, assigns importance to the outlooks of the subordinates who often decisively shaped policy. More specifically, it views U.S. decision making as the product of debate among competing factions of policymakers. Although U.S. officials during the Kennedy and Johnson years broadly accepted that the Third World presented momentous challenges, they differed markedly in their sense of how the United States should respond. Conflict was particularly acute during the JFK years but, as the latter chapters of this book show, persisted into the Johnson period. To be sure, this study demonstrates that presidents set the parameters within which conflict occurred. The predispositions at the top of the decision-making hierarchy constrained the jockeying at lower levels by empowering some factions and weakening others. Yet second- and third-tier bureaucrats often exerted significant authority, not least because presidents only intermittently paid attention to the details of policy toward Third World nations.¹⁵ There was thus ample opportunity for lower-level officials to control day-to-day policy implementation.

The second trend that drove U.S. policymaking toward the Third World was the transformation of American domestic politics during the 1960s. During the first half of the decade, Americans backed liberal reform projects as never before, targeting racial segregation, poverty, and other problems whose solutions seemed within reach for a nation endowed with limitless purpose, prosperity, and knowledge. Yet the 1960s also yielded a powerful surge of conservatism as the pervasive optimism of the early years gave way to disappointment and division. By 1965 or so, large numbers of Americans were growing weary

of liberal reformism and coming to fear that rapid social change threatened their livelihoods and social mores, trends that only intensified under the pressure of political controversies stirred up by the U.S. escalation in Vietnam.¹⁶ This book argues that this transformation—as dramatic as any that played out in so short a period of time in all of American history—had profound consequences. As urban unrest, antiwar protest, and backlash against the perceived excesses of the Great Society fueled hostility to the Johnson administration, policymakers became increasingly wary of costly policies that seemed to invite even greater criticism of the administration if they were not scaled down. Fully cognizant of the shifting political tide, LBJ abandoned what enthusiasm he still had for efforts to revamp U.S. policy toward the Third World, diverted funds from aid programs that had been hallmarks of Kennedy’s New Frontier, and grew notably tolerant of authoritarians who promised to serve U.S. interests. Richard Nixon, free of any attachment to the ambitious goals laid down by JFK or the Democratic Party more generally, completed the reorientation of policy after taking office, especially by explicitly avowing policies that had already been adopted in practice.

The third trend that contributed to the transformation of U.S. policy in the Third World was the marked decline of sympathy for the United States across much of the globe during the 1960s. Mounting hostility to U.S. involvement in Vietnam was one major cause of this tendency. Across the Third World, many nationalist leaders castigated the United States for wreaking destruction on an impoverished society and backing an unsavory autocracy in Saigon. Washington was guilty of “all types of crimes including genocide” in Vietnam, asserted one declaration of Third World leaders in January 1966.¹⁷ Even among Third World nations that remained aligned with the United States, leaders such as the shah of Iran and the fiercely anticommunist military officers who wielded power in Brazil sometimes sniped at U.S. decision making and permitted criticism of Washington as a way of demonstrating their independence from the United States.

But other factors, some of them visible before Washington became consumed with Southeast Asia, contributed as well to rising anti-Americanism. Most importantly, the accelerating Sino-Soviet competition for leadership among the revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America drove both communist powers to emphasize their radical commitments and to step up support for anti-Western forces in various places. The benefits of hindsight reveal the limits of Soviet and Chinese capabilities to expand their influence around the world. Above all, the start of China’s Cultural Revolution in 1966 significantly blunted Beijing’s ability to project power beyond its borders. But the communist powers’ revolutionary rhetoric, along

with the rise of Third World governments inspired by their support and examples, fueled anti-Western militancy in many places.¹⁸

Meanwhile, the non-aligned impulse that had once inspired some Third World leaders to seek a genuine third way outside the Cold War blocs lost traction. Polarization flowed partly from a series of coups that jolted several countries sharply to the right during the 1960s. Various forces, meanwhile, led other nations in more radical directions, tilting Third World forums against the United States and encouraging cooperation among anti-Western forces in societies as varied as North Vietnam, Cuba, and Angola. The death or downfall of charismatic Afro-Asian leaders such as India's Jawaharlal Nehru and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, towering figures who led their nations to independence and championed the non-aligned ideal, opened the way to more confrontational alternatives. So too did frustration with the slow rate of economic progress within newly independent nations and festering geopolitical tensions among them. Conflict between India and Pakistan, Iran and Egypt, and Indonesia and Malaysia shattered the notion of a united Third World operating independently of the great powers. By the mid-1960s, U.S. leaders saw few indications of the political moderation that they had sought to encourage through patient cooperation. The Johnson administration distanced itself from governments hostile to the United States and warmed up to friendly regimes that promised partnership in an increasingly hostile world. The distinct possibility that some Third World nations might soon acquire nuclear weapons only heightened U.S. determination to find more reliable ways to exert control.

Developments within the Third World thus did much to shape Washington's agenda. A global history of international affairs during the 1960s unquestionably requires deep analysis of Third World governments, political movements, and international organizations. This book, however, focuses on the deliberations and behavior of U.S. presidents, cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, military officers, diplomats, and national security bureaucrats—the American leaders who struggled to craft U.S. responses to an unusually momentous set of challenges. These officials frequently voiced frustration about the ways in which foreigners limited their options and confronted them with vexing dilemmas or *faits accomplis*. But their choices emerged first and foremost from the shifting political, bureaucratic, and intellectual contexts within which they made policy.¹⁹ Accordingly, the chapters that follow draw largely on U.S. source material—reports, memoranda, telegrams, letters, opinion polls, and others kinds of documents from numerous repositories around the United States—supplemented by material from foreign archives.

To tell the story of U.S. policymaking toward vast swaths of the globe across a decade exceeds the limits of a single volume. To cope with this limitation, this

book follows a distinct strategy designed to strike a productive balance between breadth of coverage—both geographical and chronological—and depth of analysis. It begins with a broad-brush treatment of the Kennedy years and concludes with a brief overview of policy departures undertaken early in the Nixon presidency. The aim in these sections is to identify general patterns of behavior and lay out the interpretive arc of the book. In between, the book follows a different approach, offering five case studies chosen to highlight decision making during the Johnson presidency, a crucial period of transition. These chapters permit close examination of U.S. policymaking with respect to places that posed especially serious challenges. The areas in question—Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and the British territory of Southern Rhodesia—were selected for their sheer importance to international affairs in the 1960s and their representativeness of broad challenges that the United States confronted in the 1960s and beyond.²⁰ All of them captured headlines and commanded the attention of U.S. leaders for much or all of the decade, largely because they seemed to be key battlegrounds of the Cold War and to play crucial roles not only in their regions but in the Third World more generally.

A risk of this approach lies in exaggerating the extent to which such diverse countries represented global trends or embodied core aspects of the nebulous entity that this book calls the Third World. The existence of such a “third” grouping of nations is, admittedly, problematic at best.²¹ For one thing, “Third World” implies that its component territories held only tertiary significance. That implication is misleading not only because these areas were foremost to the hundreds of millions of people who lived there but also because, at least for a time during the 1960s and 1970s, they arguably became the primary arenas of conflict in the Cold War rivalry involving the mightiest industrial powers. But the notion of a Third World is even more questionable because of the extraordinary diversity of the nations that composed it. Politically, countries generally categorized as parts of the Third World ran the gamut from U.S. allies such as Iran and the Philippines to communist nations including North Vietnam and Cuba and perhaps China, which sought to keep a foot in both the communist and Third World camps for much of the Cold War. Economically, the diversity is at least as pronounced. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, South American nations conventionally assigned to Third World status had, in some cases, per capita incomes on par with Western nations such as Greece, Finland, and Italy and considerably higher than those of many Eastern European nations belonging to the “second” world.²²

Yet “Third World,” for all its shortcomings, holds value for thinking about the international history of the Cold War. In the first place, American leaders had little doubt that such an entity existed, even if terms like the “underdeveloped” and “less developed” world sprang more readily to their lips during the

sixties. U.S. officials were well aware of the political, economic, cultural, historical, and other kinds of distinctions among the relatively poor, mostly non-white nations. On the whole, though, most of them had little trouble buying into the idea, objectionable as it may seem in retrospect, that this *mélange* of nations shared much in common and that the United States confronted a distinct set of political and economic problems in dealing with them. Historian Jason C. Parker argues compellingly, in fact, that U.S. public diplomacy—official rhetoric, propaganda, broadcasting, and the like—did much to create the concept of the Third World by projecting a vision of unity and shared interests onto diverse societies.²³ But if Americans envisioned a Third World in their public rhetoric, U.S. policymakers at the highest levels of government also embraced the concept behind walls of secrecy. The documentary record is rife with examples of American officials making sweeping generalizations or drawing lessons from one part of the Third World and applying them to another. Just as important, leaders of Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries embraced the idea that, for all their differences, they were bound together by certain experiences and interests, even by a shared “consciousness,” distinct from other segments of the globe. By the late 1960s, these leaders, like outsiders shaping and observing their behavior, were increasingly comfortable with the concept of a Third World, even if the precise meaning varied from usage to usage. Indeed, the permeability of the category and the ability of different leaders to invoke what historian Vijay Prashad calls the Third World “project” for divergent purposes at different times do much to explain how the term became so pervasive and durable.²⁴

One reason U.S. and foreign leaders alike promoted the term is one of the same reasons the term is especially useful in this book to describe the collection of nations about which it generalizes. Whereas “underdeveloped” and “less developed” suggest economic criteria for belonging, “Third World” indicates the primacy of nations’ political status *vis-à-vis* the democratic West and the communist East. For American leaders of the 1960s, it was this political stance outside the Cold War blocs—or potentially outside of them in the case of volatile Latin American or Middle Eastern nations formally aligned with the United States—more than any other characteristic that defined the problem and fueled the urgency of dealing effectively with them. Additionally, Third World is a more useful category than “non-aligned” world (or movement) since American officials saw no sharp distinction between nations that explicitly kept clear of the Cold War blocs and others that were affiliated with one side or the other but were generally presumed to have only weak and changeable commitments. To be sure, American leaders were attentive to the particular challenges posed by the principle of non-alignment starting in the mid-1950s and then by the Non-Aligned Movement after its formal

establishment in 1961. For the most part, however, they saw far fewer meaningful distinctions between the aligned and non-aligned nations of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America than they did between that broad collection of nations, on the one hand, and the industrialized areas that had definitively chosen sides in the Cold War, on the other. Americans, to put it differently, thought about Indonesia and Brazil in fundamentally similar ways even though one was a strong adherent to non-alignment and the other was formally aligned to the United States.

Accordingly, this study accepts a basic geographical conception neatly articulated by economic historian William Easterly in describing, though surely not applauding, the worldview of U.S. policymakers during the Cold War. “The First World was the United States and its rich, democratic allies,” Easterly writes. “The Second World was the Soviet Union and its eastern European satellites. The Third World was simply defined as what was left over, the areas of the world where the United States desperately wanted to deny the Soviets additional allies.”²⁵ This category clearly included even strongly Western-leaning nations in Asia and Latin America, which Americans believed to be vulnerable to revolutionary subversion and political reorientation if the United States did not play its cards right. Historians of the Third World movement undoubtedly have reason to focus on non-alignment per se as an important strand of the larger phenomenon, but historians of U.S. foreign relations do so at their peril. What counted for American officials was their sense of a nation’s vulnerability to the temptations of anti-Western radicalism or procommunist sympathies rather than their membership in a vaguely defined and changeable international grouping.

Given the array of countries meeting this capacious definition of the Third World, another major challenge of the case study approach employed in this book lies in choosing among the bilateral relationships that were both important to Washington and representative of broad patterns of U.S. behavior. One relatively easy decision was to omit U.S. policymaking toward Cuba, North Vietnam, and China, countries that seemed irrevocably committed to the communist side even if they hardly marched in lockstep with Moscow. In addition to being heavily researched by other scholars, these nations do not lend themselves to exploring how American leaders interacted with nations whose political and economic destinies seemed up for grabs.²⁶ Another decision was to draw case studies from an array of regions that stirred concern in Washington. Accordingly, the book’s central chapters span the arc of territories girdling the Sino-Soviet landmass—undoubtedly the focal point of American concern about communist expansion—as well as sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. A final important decision was to choose cases that highlight the various paths that American foreign policy followed in the Third World. In two cases,

those of Brazil and Indonesia, Washington backed coups that brought to power right-wing regimes promising to reinforce pro-Western stability in turbulent regions. In Iran, the United States reconfigured and tightened its commitment to an existing regime generally aligned with the West. In India and sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, the United States distanced itself from a government (India) and a cause (vigorous opposition to the illegal white regime in Rhodesia) that seemed likely to draw the United States into draining commitments at a time when U.S. leaders aimed to cut costs and lower risks.

Taken together, these shifts conform to a cyclical pattern that runs through the twentieth century if not the entire history of U.S. relations with the outside world. At times, the United States acted boldly on its universalizing impulse to remake the international order. In due course, however, Americans rediscovered the limits of their power and reverted to a hardheaded determination to defend narrow U.S. interests in an inhospitable world. The 1900s, 1920s, and 2010s—moments when Americans backed away from the ambitions that had once seized their imaginations—offer striking parallels to the late 1960s. In all of these cases, American leaders, making decisions in the shadow of draining wars in faraway lands, lost confidence in expansive schemes to impose U.S. political and economic models on the wider world. Yet the 1960s were an especially consequential phase of this interplay of competing impulses. The disintegration of the European colonial empires and the assertiveness of Third World nations generated an exceptionally fluid moment in world history. The 1960s, even more than the “Wilsonian moment” following the First World War, yielded nothing less than a rupture in the basic composition of international society and global consciousness about who was entitled to a voice in geopolitics. The U.S. response to such a moment was sure to have profound implications not only for the pace and extent of change but also for the ways in which foreign societies viewed the United States and Americans understood themselves.

By the early 1970s, the United States indisputably remained a globe-straddling superpower with enormous political, economic, and military influence. But the experiences of the previous decade had shattered the confidence and ambition to refashion the global order that had grown since the Second World War and peaked in the early 1960s. In different ways, the stories in this book reveal Washington trying and mostly failing in the Kennedy years to promote constructive change through the power of its example and know-how. Fully confronting the limits of its capabilities for the first time since 1945, American leaders thereafter resorted to different methods of exerting control over a world rife with troubles. Those new methods sometimes succeeded in shoring up American influence while reducing costs, as architects of the changing policies intended. Yet Washington’s altered approach to the Third

World was hardly a clear-cut success. The new regimes cultivated by U.S. leaders often made heavy new demands of Washington even while asserting their independence of American leadership. Over the longer term, some of those regimes brought discredit to the United States and ultimately collapsed. The policy innovations of the 1960s yielded not the stability and security that U.S. officials hoped for but a world of uncertainty and a host of new dilemmas that would beset the United States in the 1970s and beyond.

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