

## Introduction

# WHO SPEAKS FOR JOELITO?

## The Dilemmas of U.S. Power in the World

Joelito Filártiga had little time to comprehend the sheer brutality inflicted upon his body. On March 29, 1976, the seventeen-year-old Paraguayan was kidnapped from his home in Asunción by members of a death squad led by Américo Peña-Irala, a police official in that nation's capital. He was taken to a nearby *comisaría*, one in a vast network of police stations routinely used by the Alfredo Stroessner regime (1954–1989) to detain and interrogate political prisoners. It was there that the young man was tortured for approximately two hours, abating only when he died after suffering cardiac arrest. An independent autopsy of Joelito's mutilated corpse later revealed multiple bruises, stab wounds, and burns typically associated with the *picana*, an electrified device used by government officials to sear the flesh of dissidents.<sup>1</sup> What had the young man done to elicit such inhumane treatment? He was the son of Joel Filártiga, a well-known artist and physician who provided free medical services in small rural towns and peasant communities throughout the country. More to the point, the father was an outspoken critic and opponent of the Paraguayan government. As such, Joelito was a proxy of the Stroessner regime's unrelenting and ruthless campaign to stifle political dissent through authoritarian repression.<sup>2</sup>

By any standard, his death was a tragedy. It also manifestly violated universal norms of human rights established in 1948 by the United Nations ("Universal Declaration of Human Rights") and the Organization of American States ("American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man"), which the U.S. government since that time has pledged to uphold and enforce. Yet at the moment of the Filártiga murder, U.S. officials had supported the Paraguayan regime responsible for that heinous act for more than twenty years. Having established in 1954 a "good partnership" rooted in mutual opposition to communism, the United States and Alfredo Stroessner proceeded to forge a close diplomatic relationship

that endured for decades. But it was not just Joelito. Based on the 2008 final report of the Comisión de Verdad y Justicia (Truth and Justice Commission), which investigated the Stroessner regime's abuses, 20,090 Paraguayan citizens had been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, disappearances, forced exile, and even extrajudicial execution.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, the murder of Joelito Filártiga was plotted and carried out solely by Paraguayan hands. But many officials and policy analysts in Washington implicitly accepted such flagrant abuses as an acceptable level of collateral damage given the high stakes of the global Cold War. While lamentable, they would likely acknowledge his example, and perhaps many more were nonetheless necessary to ensure the political stability of allies who provided security through anticommunism, thus enhancing U.S. power in Latin America and throughout the world. The national interest of the United States demanded as much, as then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained to his staff in October 1974: "all the other stuff is sentimental nonsense."<sup>4</sup>

## DILEMMAS AND DICTATORS

But through its reliance on authoritarian regimes to promote those interests, the United States was sharply at odds with its own rhetoric regarding the expansion of the nation's self-defined democratic mission in the world. The process by which officials in Washington made bilateral policy decisions toward Paraguay during the Cold War brought out in stark relief a persistent theme that has defined the nation's diplomacy for more than a century—the dictator dilemma. The overall argument of this book is that the Stroessner regime was symbolic of a broader foreign policy struggle to perpetuate, enforce, and ultimately redefine the importance of friendly dictators to U.S. foreign policy interests. Political leaders in the United States since its founding have repeatedly characterized the nation as an exemplar of individual liberty and freedom, values presumed to be both uniquely embedded within its own historical experience and universal in their appeal to others.<sup>5</sup> This notion forms the basis of American exceptionalism, which holds that the United States is an extraordinary nation tasked with a special historical mission to play in world affairs. Exceptionalism functions as an integral part of the domestic political framework by which foreign policy decisions are rendered; it has consistently provided government officials with the language by which they communicate to the public a normative vision of a complex and dangerous world in which American power naturally serves to safeguard and advance those values.<sup>6</sup>

Rooted in John Winthrop's evocation in 1630 of his Puritan colony as an exemplary "city upon a hill," this belief suffused the long history of continental, hemispheric, and latterly global expansion by the United States. Echoes of