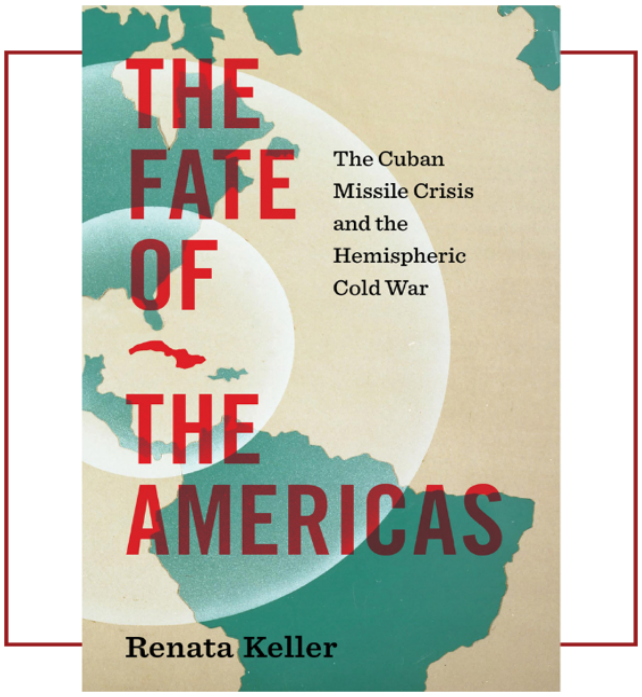
Dr. Renata Keller, University of Nevada, Reno, author of *The Fate of the Americas: The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Hemispheric Cold War*

Dr. Renata Keller discussed her book *The Fate of the Americas: The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Hemispheric Cold* War at CENFAD on October 29. Afterwards, I chat with her about her research and its hemispheric scope.



Marcella Aline Toledo: Hello Dr. Keller, I'm really glad to have the chance to talk with you today! First of all, how would you describe *The Fate of the Americas*?

Dr. Renata Keller: Thanks for inviting me! I describe my book as a hemispheric history of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is a book about how Latin Americans affected the Cuban Missile Crisis and how the missile crisis affected Latin America.

MAT: As a student interested in pan-Americanism, I'm fascinated by this work, especially because the crisis was one of the events that led to the invocation of the Rio Pact. I've been reading a lot recently about the idea that this treaty was the "multilateralization of the Monroe Doctrine," or that "it enshrined the Monroe Doctrine into international law," and you also show that a Cuban magazine of the time touched upon this topic. So, do you think the Monroe Doctrine still functions, implicitly or explicitly, as a principle in U.S.-Latin American relations today?

RK: These days, I think the Monroe Doctrine has come back in a big way. There was a period, including during the missile crisis, when the United States was interested in multilateralism and in working together to defend hemispheric security. But I think recently we've seen a return to unilateralism and this position that, because United States CAN do certain things, it SHOULD be allowed

to do them and that it has the right to attack other countries and even citizens of other countries in international waters. And so, I think we've seen a return to the imposition of United States power, without any attempt to work with other partners in the region.

MAT: Yes, and. I was also wondering what would have happened if the Organization of American States members' vote had not reached unanimity during the Crisis.

RK: Even without a unanimous vote, if at least two-thirds of the OAS member countries had voted to approve the quarantine, it still would have been an OAS quarantine. It still would have been a multilateral quarantine under the auspices of the Organization of American States and according to the UN Charter, that would have been a legal response. But the lack of a unanimous vote would have shown that some of Cuba's neighbors were questioning whether the quarantine was necessary at all. So, on the public relations front, it would have been a loss for the United States. And if they hadn't gotten the 2\3 vote, the United States still was planning on doing the quarantine, but it would have required a declaration of war.

A declaration of war would have set a really different tone at the beginning of the missile crisis. Instead of a multilateral act of hemispheric defense, the quarantine would have been a unilateral declaration of war against either Cuba or the Soviet Union.

MAT: Yes, absolutely. And you wrote that, I'm quoting, "historically the threat of intervention in Latin America most often came from the United States, but during the Cold War many in the region came to perceive the Soviet Union and communist infiltration as significant threats to their sovereignty." What other key parts of the story become visible when we shift away from a U.S.-centered narrative?

RK: I think that by widening our lens, we can see first of all that a lot of people really were worried about Soviet infiltration. And that was, I think, something that sets the Cold War apart from other periods when the United States was the greatest threat. For most of the first half of the 20th century, for example, the United States was the main foreign power intervening in Latin America. But that changes with the Cuban Revolution and with the increasingly close relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union. A lot of people started worrying more, and had evidence, really, of the possibility that the Soviets could get involved in Latin America. And then when the news broke that the Soviets had sent nuclear missiles to Cuba, that gave even further evidence of Soviet plans to intervene in the region. And so I think the missile crisis did give a lot of people

across Latin America really excellent evidence, legitimate evidence, of the threat of Soviet intervention.

"This project required a lot of planning and preparing to work in a lot of archives and places that I had never been before"

MAT: One of the parts of the book that I was most interested in was that you clearly show how Brazil appears repeatedly as an ambivalent actor. For example, you cite the Order of the Southern Cross being given to Che Guevara, and I know that that decoration was also awarded to Mussolini in the 1930s. How do you interpret Brazil's position: more like an intermediary or opportunistic?

RK: I think that Brazil played both roles. They were trying to use the missile crisis as an opportunity to raise their profile on the international stage and to act as an intermediary. They had tried multiple times to negotiate between the United States and Cuba in the years and months leading up to the missile crisis. Because they had had more friendly relations with Cuba than the most countries in the Americas, the Brazilians thought that they could maybe have an opportunity to use that exceptional relationship to negotiate between both parties. Brazil did not treat the crisis as just a US and Soviet confrontation; instead, they argued that Cuba needed to be involved and offered to help do so. In so doing, Brazilians were also promoting Latin American sovereignty and the idea that Latin American countries could make decisions on the global scale.

MAT: You mention that we have not yet come close to telling a complete story of the causes or consequences of this event. In your view, what perspectives or sources are still missing from the historical account?

RK: I try to address a lot of what was missing in my book! We were missing the Latin American perspective: this was a Latin American event, and so missing perspectives from Latin America left a gaping hole in understanding why the crisis happened and how it played out the way it did. I also think there still is room for other places to study, responses in other parts of the world and other parts of Americas. I decided to limit my book to looking at countries that were members of the Organization of American States, but there are other parts of the Americas, like Canada, that I didn't talk about. I also think a global history of the Cuban Missile Crisis could provide some really interesting new perspectives.

MAT: Your archival work is really impressive! Your research led you to so many Latin American countries. I'm curious about the logistical obstacles in writing a truly hemispheric history.

RK: There were some significant logistical obstacles. I started this research in 2012 and pretty soon after that Zika broke out and I didn't want to go to Latin American countries with mosquitoes because I was planning on having children. So that really limited the places where I could do research for a while. After I was done having children, I did expand my research travel plans and went to places like Panama, but then COVID hit. And once again, that limited my research opportunities and my writing opportunities (it's not easy to write with two children in quarantine!). So those were the two biggest logistical obstacles, just things that I did not have control over. Beyond that, this project required a lot of planning and preparing to work in a lot of archives and places that I had never been before. Getting to know how different archives worked and how they organized their collections was a challenge. But those are normal challenges and typical parts of doing archival research. So those challenges were less daunting than the things like Zika and COVID that were out of my control.

MAT: Absolutely. And which archives surprised you the most, and which ones challenged you the most?

RK: One archive that surprised me was Bolivia's foreign ministry archive. When I was there, I found all these reports from Bogotá, about how people were just freaking out about the Cuban Missile Crisis, to an extent that I hadn't seen anywhere else in Latin America. At that point I had been researching for quite a while, and it just seemed like there was so much more fear in Colombia than in other parts of the region. It surprised me and made me question some of my assumptions, and so then I was like, "well, I have to go to Colombia now," which was wonderful. That collection of reports was one of those great surprises that happens in the archives.

MAT: This is so fascinating. Well, Dr. Keller, this conversation was extremely insightful. Thank you so much for your time!

RK: Thank you for having me!