A GOOD NEIGHBOR? U.S. LATIN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This talk seeks to answer the following question: Is it possible for a world power to be a good neighbor? In order to offer a response to this inquiry I will focus on the historical development of United States and Latin American foreign relations in the 20th century. I will demonstrate how at various times throughout this period, the US sought to be a good neighbor by promoting economic progress, democracy, and political stability among its Latin American neighbors. However, its good intentions proved insufficient. Geopolitical and ideological limitations, prevailing economic interests, racial prejudices, and especially the inability of US policy makers to understand Latin American countries on their own terms, constrained the United States from being a good neighbor. I am aware that the good intentions of the United States could be questioned as part of a project of imperial hegemony, but I also maintain that these intentions were still sincere and deserve to be taken seriously and, above all, studied.

The Interventionism

Theodore Roosevelt is widely held as the first imperial President of the United States. His level of interest, knowledge, and participation in international concerns, was unique in relation to the presidents who preceded him. Rejecting the isolationism promoted by the founders of the Republic, Roosevelt believed that the United States should promote world
peace and stability. He was convinced that only a country with no expansionist ambitions, like the United States had been, could serve as an international police force to uphold international peace and order. Roosevelt’s foreign policy was characterized by a combination of diplomacy and intimidation, what came to be known as *big stick diplomacy*.

Latin America was the region where this diplomatic approach was most visibly applied. Roosevelt’s objectives in Latin America were clear: to promote peace, stability, and progress. Concerned about the growth of German naval power and aware that Europe was fast approaching political turmoil, Roosevelt sought to deter Germany from meddling in the Western Hemisphere. To achieve these objectives, Roosevelt relied on interventionism and naval intimidation, commonly referred to as *gunboat diplomacy*. The United States’ increasingly powerful navy served to project and exercise the country’s power to the countries Latin America, especially those of Central America and the Caribbean.

Another key factor in understanding Roosevelt’s foreign policy—and the political zeitgeist of United States during this era—is racism. In many respects, Roosevelt adhered to the prevailing racial ideologies of his historical period. Therefore, it should not be surprising that his negative view of Latin Americans influenced his foreign policy. For Roosevelt, many of the peoples of Latin America occupied an inferior position among civilized nations and were thus, owing to their subordinate racial status, incapable of self-government.

Two key factors influenced Roosevelt’s foreign policy toward Latin America: the Roosevelt Corollary (to the Monroe Doctrine) and the Panama Canal. The first was born out of Americans’ fear that the region’s political instability, and above all, the inability of some Latin American countries to meet their external debt commitments, would make them vulnerable to or serve as an excuse for European intervention. American leaders feared that a European power, in particular Germany, might exploit the political volatility of certain Caribbean
countries, and attempt to build a naval base there; thus threatening the interests and security of the US. In his annual address to Congress in December of 1906, Roosevelt clearly defined his administration's position on this potential problem:

“It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power. [...] We would interfere with them only in the last resort, and then only if it became evident that their inability or unwillingness to do justice at home and abroad had violated the rights of the United States or had invited foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations. It is a mere truism to say that every nation, whether in America or anywhere else, which desires to maintain its freedom, its independence, must ultimately realize that the right of such independence cannot be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it.”

In this speech, Roosevelt denies any imperialist interest toward Latin America and makes clear that the United States desires only prosperity for its neighbors. In a paternalistic tone,
Roosevelt points out that those Latin American countries that behave correctly—most notably through paying their external debts—have nothing to fear from the United States. However, Roosevelt reserves the United States’ right and obligation as a civilized nation, to intervene in those countries that do not act in accordance with the parameters defined by the US. In other words, the United States would be a good neighbor only to those Latin American countries which did not present a problem or threat to US interests.

The American interest in the construction of an interoceanic canal through Central America did not originate with Roosevelt, but it was him who ultimately made the ambition a reality. As noted above, the US acquired a small, isolated empire at the end of the 19th century, which altered the US geopolitical position, and in turn, spurred US interest in seeing the stalled interoceanic canal construction resume. Prior to this point, building such a canal was motivated by economic interests, but given the US’ recently acquired imperial holdings, strategic factors came into play as well. The United States’ experiences in the Spanish-American war of 1898, in particular the USS Oregon’s long journey around the southern tip of South America in order to join the fighting in Cuba, called attention to the need for a channel which would facilitate the US naval defense of the US territory, which is flanked by oceans on its West and East coasts. Following the failed efforts led by Ferdinand de Lessep and the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interoceánico de Panamá, the US authorities began negotiations with the Colombian government for the construction of a canal through Panama. Since Panama was not a separate country at that time, but a province belonging to the country of Colombia, the Colombian government demanded significant financial compensation, which ultimately led Roosevelt to instead encourage and support a separatist rebellion in Panama. The treaty that the Americans imposed on the newly-formed, separatist Panamanian government in 1903 were more favorable
to the US than those that had been negotiated with Colombia, and allowed the construction of the canal to begin, which was eventually completed and inaugurated in August of 1914.

The construction of the canal had an immediate impact on relations between the United States and Latin America, as defense of the region quickly became a priority for the US government. In order to ensure regional security, the US saw it "necessary" to guarantee order in the Caribbean and Central American region through direct military interventions in countries such as Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

Interventionism was not the only tool used by the United States to protect the canal and promote its interests, as it also resorted to dollar diplomacy. This consisted of a combination of racism, paternalism, strategic concerns, and good intentions. Associated with the Presidency of William H. Taft, who occupied the White House between 1909 and 1913, dollar diplomacy was based on the use of American economic power. Taft sought to avoid direct military interventions by "substituting dollars for bullets." Taft's logic was simple: through American "aid," Latin American countries would achieve the stability necessary to promote trade, which in turn would bring peace, freedom, and democracy, and ultimately, rendering interventionism unnecessary.

The presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) brought the preceding interventionist period to an end. Wilson was a conservative Southern scholar whose foreign policy was marked by strong idealism. Wilson wanted to keep European nations out of the Americas and improve relations with Latin America. Speaking about Latin America, Wilson said: "We must prove ourselves their friends and champions upon terms of equity." To this end, he considered it necessary to avoid military interventions and promote the self-determination and democratization of Latin American countries through free and fair elections. Wilson believed it was the United States’ obligation to teach South Americans "to elect good men."
In Wilson's case, paternalism and good intentions were defeated by geopolitical realities. The outbreak of World War I reaffirmed the need to protect the Panama Canal through the promotion of political stability and order in the region, which translated into increased US interventionism. In 1915, American troops occupied Haiti and remained there for 19 years. A year later, in 1916, US Marines invaded the Dominican Republic, which they controlled until 1924. Wilson's interventionism was also tinged with racial stereotypes and cultural prejudices, as his ardent skepticism of non-white people's ability to govern themselves is well-documented.

The Good Neighbor Policy

Without a doubt the Good Neighbor Policy was the most fruitful change in US-Latin America relations in the 20th century: the (GNP). To understand the GNP, it is necessary to explain its historical context. The first factor to take into account is the growing international instability caused by the rise of totalitarianism in Europe and Asia during this period. The aggressive postures taken by totalitarian dictators of this era translated into strong militarism and an upsurge in imperialist competition for markets and global resources. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the German expansionism in Europe, and the Spanish civil war all hinted at an impending global confrontation. Fascism became a threat to the economic, political and strategic interests of the United States in Latin America. The presence of communities of Italian, Japanese, and German descent in Latin America, as well as fascist sympathies and Nazi activities in the region, gave American politicians and military officials cause for concern.

In addition to these factors, consideration must also be given to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) to the US Presidency in 1932. When FDR arrived at the White House in 1933, his priority was addressing the Great Depression and its effects on American society. However,
complex and threatening developments abroad forced FDR to also face issues beyond US borders. In the case of Latin America, FDR sought to improve relations through the GNP. FDR wanted to develop hemispheric solidarity in order to form a united front of defense and resistance against the Axis countries. To this end, he considered it necessary to promote economic, cultural, political, and military cooperation with countries of Latin American. FDR also wanted to guarantee US access to Latin American markets by promoting a more equitable relationship with governments of the region. Thus, he defended a multilateral interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, rejected interventionism, and encouraged collective action. Roosevelt believed in reciprocity, which favored a diplomatic *quid pro quo*: if the governments of Latin American countries maintained order, the United States would fulfill its promise not to intervene in their affairs. However, this did not mean that FDR would renounce the United States’ right to defend its interests in the region by any means necessary.

Despite criticism, most Latin American governments saw the GNP as the end of US interventionism and the beginning of relations based on equality and mutual respect, and supported the GNP.

The GNP functioned as an extension of the New Deal, a wide ranging set of reforms implemented to address the staggering economic suffering of the Great Depression. In other words, FDR’s approach to Latin America was intertwined with his policies aimed at US economic recovery. The architect of the economic aspects the GNP was Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, who believed that it was necessary to stimulate international trade to promote US economic recovery. To accomplish this, he sought to promote *reciprocal trade agreements*, which entailed the reduction of import tariffs charged by the United States up to as much as 50%. Between 1934 and 1942, the United States signed fifteen bilateral agreements with Latin American nations, which helped strengthen relations with these countries, a region hit hard
hit by the crisis. In 1933, US exports to Latin America totaled $363 million dollars. Six years later the amount reached $548 million dollars. Latin American imports into the US also saw increases, reaching $493 million dollars in 1939, an increase of $177 million dollars compared to 1933. Once World War II (WWII) had ended and much of Europe was in ruins, these treaties helped to increase US economic dominance in Latin America.

The GNP also involved an ideological and cultural campaign to counteract the fascist influence in Latin America. This propaganda campaign included films, radio broadcasts, and advertising. It also sought to promote cooperation and sell the "American Way of Life," and thus, promote US economic interests. To coordinate this effort, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIA) was created under the direction of Nelson Rockefeller. The selection of the New York tycoon was not accidental, as his membership in the Republican party brought an air of bipartisanship to the office. In addition, Rockefeller had great professional interest in Latin America, motivated in part by his investments in the Venezuelan oil industry. What is more, the OCIA also garnered the enthusiastic support of Hollywood in the production of films clearly intended as propaganda; despite film industry support, some of these films were nonetheless huge flops.

After the United States entered WWII, most Latin American countries cooperated by supplying the Allies with natural resources, as well as providing political and strategic support of the US military effort; only Brazil and Mexico contributed militarily. Brazil organized the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, which actively participated in the European front, especially in Italy. The Mexican contribution was oriented towards air support with the creation of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force. The so-called Aztec Eagles fought on the Pacific front, mainly in the Philippines. These two expeditionary forces constituted a historic
level of military cooperation with the United States. Both Mexicans and Brazilians received training, weapons, and logistical support from the United States.

To what extent was Latin American cooperation during WWII a consequence of the GNP? It is indisputable that the GNP helped improve relations between the United States and Latin America and that this policy served as a crucial factor in shaping attitudes of Latin Americans towards Allied countries during WWII. However, it is necessary to emphasize that additional factors must also be taken into account. During this period, the countries of Latin America also had their own self-protective agendas and concerns, as they understood that alone they would not be able to fend off the Nazis if Germany was victorious in Europe. In other words, it was convenient for Latin American governments to cooperate with the main military and industrial force in the Western Hemisphere, the United States. However, for the smallest and most economically vulnerable countries of Latin America who depended upon the US for investment and markets, supporting the war effort was not financially feasible. Finally, for those countries who did provide assistance, it equated to a tangible benefit for their people: better trade conditions, weapons, training, loans, and the like.

The Cuban Revolution

For the United States, the most significant troubles it faced in Latin America in the late 1950s, were in the Caribbean. In Cuba, the popular uprising against a US-backed dictator and anti-communist ally, would come to be the United States’ worst defeat during the Cold War. Under the leadership of a young lawyer named Fidel Castro, the Cuban people overthrew the dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Unable to find a viable alternative to Batista, who had converted into more of a liability than an asset, the US authorities could not stop the advance of Castro’s revolutionary forces, who marched victoriously into the Cuban capital of Havana, in January of 1959, signaling the start of the Cuban Revolution.
Eisenhower administration officials failed to fully grasp the depth of Cuban nationalism, and likewise, did not comprehend that Batista's fall marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the island (and its relations with the United States). US officials erroneously believed that relations with the new Cuban government could continue under similar conditions as in the past. They underestimated the revolutionary leaders’ commitment to reaffirming Cuban sovereignty, and ending US economic control of and political influence on the island. As such, Cuban revolutionary leaders were intolerant of US criticism or intervention in the internal affairs of the country.

Undoubtedly, US and Cuban authorities held divergent interpretations of the United States’ role throughout Cuban history. While the Eisenhower administration asserted that Cuba was indebted to the United States for having freed the island from the Spanish yoke in 1898, Cubans understood that US intervention in their war with Spain had deprived the island of the opportunity to be truly free and sovereign. The Cuban revolutionaries fully understood the historical significance of the Platt amendment, the resulting American interventions in Cuba in 1906, 1912, and 1917, and of the role played by the United States in Cuba’s failed revolution of 1933. As a result, the new Cuban leaders were deeply committed to reaffirming the country’s national political and economic sovereignty in relation the US. At the time of the revolution, the US had direct investments in the island totaling $1 billion dollars; US companies also controlled 90% of the Cuban mining industry, 40% of the island’s sugar industry, and 50% of its arable land.

The divergent political stance taken by Cuba’s leaders in relation to their US counterparts led to diplomatic tensions between the two countries and eventually to Cuba’s pivot towards and embrace of Soviet support, which ultimately transformed the island into a
direct adversary of the United States. Owing in part to Soviet aid and support, the revolution endured and served as a thorn in the side US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

The consolidation of the Cuban Revolution represented the United States’ first defeat in Latin America. Cuba became a model of anti-imperialist resistance and reaffirmation of the potential for guerrilla-based armed conflict to achieve socio-political change. Additionally, Cuba served as a model of alternative economic development—utilizing Soviet economic, military, and technical support—the Cubans implemented a socialist (state-planned economy) as its vehicle for development and ultimately, for ending its economic dependence. The Cuban revolutionaries implemented agrarian reform, expropriated natural resources, and nationalized foreign companies, most notably, those under American ownership. The Revolution also entailed alternative models of political and social organization that featured wealth redistribution programs, literacy campaigns, cultural events, and socialized healthcare. These sweeping initiatives, combined with the popularity and charisma of Fidel Castro, had profound influence across Latin American society, especially among generations of young people. The Revolution validated the use of armed violence as a means to achieve social, economic, and political changes, and encouraged the radicalization of segments of the Latin American left, which would eventually lead to the polarization Latin American politics, and in some cases, produce tragic results.

As a consequence of the Cuban Revolution, Latin America took center stage in the Cold War. Prior to the Revolution, Latin America had played only a minor role in the Soviet-American confrontation. However, Castro and his bearded compatriots would alter the international landscape—provoking an expansion of the Cold War and almost unleashing a nuclear war as a result of the Cuban missile crisis. Yet, it is necessary to emphasize that the Revolution did not alter the United States’ hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, however, it
did result in US leaders’ revision of their foreign policy priorities and strategies in the region. Finally, Latin America had become a priority for the United States, which was never the case since the GNP was in effect.

During the 1960s, the US objective was to prevent the spread of Cuba’s hemispheric influence at all costs. The US government proceeded to isolate Cuba by expelling its delegation from the OAS and declaring an economic, social, and cultural blockade against the island. In addition, the US provided Latin American governments with military aid to bolster their abilities put down popular uprisings that sought to replicate the success of the Cuban guerrilla model. Latin American soldiers were advised by Green Berets in counterinsurgency techniques, while their officers learned interrogation and torture methods at the School of the Americas.

The United States’ assistance in Latin America was not limited to military support alone, as the former resumed its good neighbor efforts through an economic aid program known as the Alliance for Progress (AP). Proposed by President John F. Kennedy (JFK) in 1961, the AP sought to address the adverse socio-economic conditions that had set the stage for revolutions in Latin America: backwardness, poverty, inequality, etc. For the Kennedy administration, promoting progress and prosperity became a favored method to combat communism in Latin America. JFK even proposed a ten-year plan to accelerate economic development and promote social development and democracy throughout the region. US leaders believed that the promotion of trade diversification, industrialization, land reform, and literacy in Latin America would constrain the expansion of Cuba’s sphere of influence.

The AP led to a significant increase in US economic aid to Latin America. Between 1962 and 1967, the region received $1.4 million dollars in annual economic aid. Over a period of 10 years, the total aid reached $22.3 billion dollars. So was this investment sufficient to meet US objectives? The short answer is no—because despite the economic growth the region
experienced (averaging 2.4% during the 1960s), US economic aid played a minor role in this process.1 In addition, the social achievements of the PA were limited, especially when measured against its (perhaps overly) ambitious initial objectives. Poverty and illiteracy were not eradicated, nor the socio-political consequences of their persistence throughout the region.

Why then, did the AP fail to meet its stated goals? First, because the level of aid provided, although it appeared substantial at first, still proved insufficient to support such an ambitious program. Second, American officials thought AP program initiatives would receive active local support and collaboration, but this never materialized due to opposition from Latin American middle and upper classes. Lastly, failure was due to the weakness of local reformist efforts and democratic processes. The lack of valid interlocutors for the AP was partially due to US policy during the first stage of the Cold War, which treated Latin American reformist efforts as if they represented transitions to communism.

What is more, the AP also failed to meet its goal of promoting democracy in the region. Between 1962 and 1963 alone there were six successful coups carried out in Latin America: Argentina (1962), Peru (1962), Guatemala (1963), Ecuador (1963), Dominican Republic (1963), and Honduras (1963). Additionally, the 1964 Brazilian coup that culminated with the installation of the nationalist government of Joao Goulart, should be added as an addendum to this list. The latter military coup was supported by the US government and set the stage for a dictatorship in Latin America’s most influential country, which would come to last 21 years. By 1968, military dictatorships controlled Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, almost all of Central America.

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1 According to Peter H. Smith, this growth was due to three factors: the successful application of import substitution strategies, international demand for raw materials, and private investment. Smith, 1999: 152.
One could argue that the invasion of the Dominican Republic represented the climax of this period in Latin America. After years of controlling the Dominican people with an iron fist, while enjoying the support of the US government, Rafael L. Trujillo was assassinated in 1961. His death, as could expected, opened up a period of political instability, but one that eventually reached a positive outcome—the first democratic elections held in the Dominican Republic in decades. Dominicans elected the writer, Juan Bosch, to the presidency, who implemented a series of socio-economic reforms which were not welcomed by all his fellow compatriots. After only seven months in office, Bosch was overthrown in September, 1963 and his government was replaced by a group of leaders dominated by Trujillo loyalists, known as Trujillistas. Frustrated by Trujillo backers’ return to rule, even after Trujillo’s death, the Dominican people rebelled in 1965, demanding that Bosch be reinstalled as president. With the growing threat of civil war and mounting fear that the Dominican Republic would turn into another Cuba, the Johnson administration—with the support of the OAS—invaded the sovereign Caribbean nation. After the US-led invasion the Dominican Republic was governed by Joaquín Balaguer, a former Trujillo supporter, who governed the island through repression for 12 years.

In the case of the Dominican Republic, US intentions of being a good neighbor ran headlong against geopolitical realities and ideological determinisms. In the United States’ decision between fostering democracy and socioeconomic reforms on the one hand, and curbing communist threat (however real or imagined) on the other, American policy-makers opted for the latter, eventually resorting to their tried and true method of choice: military interventionism. For many Latin Americans, the invasion of the Dominican Republic served as yet another example of the United States’ abuses of power in Latin America, and concrete proof of US inability to be a good neighbor.

Conclusion
This analysis of US-Latin American relations confirms how difficult it is for a world power to be a good neighbor. As the reader has observed, throughout the 20th century the US government has on several occasions attempted to improve its relations with Latin America, promoting economic progress and political stability among its southern neighbors. The United States’ good intentions were well received by Latin American states, eager for a more balanced relationship with its powerful northern neighbor. For their part, Latin American governments held expectations that the US would approach problems facing the region multilaterally, for the end of the direct and indirect intervention of the United States in its internal affairs, and that the US would support its economic development. Motivated and constrained by mainly economic and geopolitical factors, the United States’ good intentions failed. The US intentions fell victim to racial prejudice, ideological determinisms, geopolitical priorities, overriding economic interests, and especially, ignorance of history, culture, social structures, and the political dynamics of individual Latin American countries. In the words of Lawrence S. Eagleburger, the last Secretary of State of the Bush administration:

I will not deny that my country has its share of responsibility for tending to see our continental relations through the prism, sometimes deforming, of the Cold War [...] But we made mistakes, and the most serious was the occasional inability to approach our continent on its own terms and face these problems in their own right.2

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2 Raymont, 2005: 329. Translated by the author.