

2007

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### Recommended Citation

Masud-Piloto, Félix (2007) "U.S.-Latin American Relations in Historical Perspective," *Diálogo*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol10/iss1/1>

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# U.S.-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Any efforts to understand United States-Latin American relations must begin by placing them in historical perspective. A historical overview, however brief, will underline the fact that for nearly two hundred years of political and economic relations, the U.S. has misperceived Latin America as an unequal, weaker, and dependent client that must always abide by its imperial dictates and rules, with little or no say on those dictates. That perception has seldom changed, and U.S. presidents and policy makers have often referred to the region as unstable, chaotic, and ungovernable, and stereotyped its leaders as irresponsible, untrustworthy, too radical, and even irrational.

The misperceptions and stereotypes have been sustained by a conviction among U.S. policy makers, that only they know what is good and right for the region. Within that framework, in 1823 the U.S. unilaterally proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, through which it declared itself the defender and guarantor of Latin American independence against external threats. In reality, the Monroe Doctrine had little to do with Latin American independence, what it did was give the United States a pretext to intervene in Latin American affairs any time it deemed it necessary.

The Monroe Doctrine became the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Latin America, and was soon followed by equally paternalistic and imperial initiatives like Manifest Destiny, Roosevelt Corollary, Missionary Diplomacy, Gunboat Diplomacy, Good Neighbor Policy, Johnson Doctrine, and the Alliance for Progress. Publicly, all policy initiatives, doctrines, and even military interventions were portrayed as benevolent and generous gestures of a wiser, more powerful and wealthier neighbor to a less fortunate one. The United States would show Latin America how to build lasting democracies, prosperous economies, and stable societies. Behind the official rhetoric, however, U.S. policies in the region were guided by self-interest and the goals of territorial expansion and hegemonic control over the region.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States' plan had achieved remarkable success. It had conquered more than half of Mexico's territory, colonized Puerto Rico, and militarily occupied Cuba. Most importantly, as a result of the Spanish-Cuban-American war, the U.S. ascended to the ranks of world power, and with its enhanced power, pursued its political and economic interests in the region with greater arrogance, aggressiveness, and repression. Hundreds of thousands died at the hands of U.S.-supported dictators like Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, François Duvalier, Anastasio Somoza García, Carlos Castillo Armas, Fulgencio Batista, Jorge Videla, and Augusto Pinochet to name just some of the most notorious and bloody of the many Washington allies in the region. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the architect of the Good Neighbor Policy, justified U.S. policy contradictions in Latin America in cynical but realistic terms when he rationalized his administration's support for Trujillo's repressive regime: "Trujillo is a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch."

During the Cold War, when the two superpowers divided the world into spheres of influence, the U.S. openly invoked the Monroe Doctrine and again unilaterally placed the region in its

sphere of influence and out of bounds to any foreign interests. It then proceeded to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1954), invade Cuba (1961), the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), and Panama (1989), launched a ten years war of terror and destabilization against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, propped undemocratic governments and fueled civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala. More than one million people, mostly civilians, lost their lives in those conflicts. In the Southern Cone, the U.S. condoned and supported the brutal repression of the military dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay that resulted in the death of tens of thousands and more than two million political exiles.

Today, despite the failure of Washington's grand designs to advance economic prosperity and good government in the region, Latin Americans are poorer than they were in the 1960s, and governmental corruption is as rampant as it was one hundred years ago. Still, in total disregard of its dismal economic, political, and human rights record in the region, the U.S. still pretends to have the right prescription for Latin America's problems. Preaching the wonders of globalization through the harsh measures of neo-liberalism, it promised the region a panacea of economic growth, prosperity, and democracy. During the past two decades, however, the neo-liberal model has resulted in more economic misery for most Latin Americans, and the region currently has an external debt almost twice as big as in 1990. And while it is true that Latin America is more democratic today than at any other time in its history, it is not as a result of U.S. encouragement. Democracy arrived in the region thanks to the sacrifice and blood of more than one million Latin American men and women who fought and triumphed over the forces of repression and terror, forces too often supported, encourage, and condoned by U.S. interests in the region.

Too many negative experiences with the its northern neighbor has led Latin America to look inward for solutions to its economic problems, and reject U.S. political and military interventionism. The election in recent years of progressive leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Luiz Ignasio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador have set the region on an unprecedented path toward economic integration and political cooperation. For the first time since independence, the Latin American countries are working together, and challenging U.S. designs on the region. The new political leadership taking root in Latin American seems committed to protecting and sharing their natural resources, protecting and preserving the region's sovereignty, and strengthening their fragile democracies. If the U.S. is truly interested in the hemisphere's stability and prosperity, it should find ways of encouraging and supporting, not sabotaging these efforts.

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