Was the United States a "Good Neighbor" Toward Latin America in the 1930s?

Viewpoint I: Yes, the Good Neighbor Policy was a new beginning in U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933 he promised "bold, persistent experimentation" and pledged to abandon the failed policies, and failed ideas, of the past. His New Deal promised not only a new relationship between the American people and their federal government, but also new relationships between the United States and the nations of Latin America.

Relations between the United States and the other nations of the hemisphere had not been easy: though the Monroe Doctrine had put the United States on record as opposing European colonialism in the hemisphere, the United States had not always recognized the sovereignty of its neighbors. The Mexican War in the 1840s resulted in the United States seizing one-third of Mexico's territory; American filibustered had tried to set up independent states in Nicaragua in the 1850s; and in 1898 American outrage against Spanish colonialism in the Western Hemisphere had led to war, and the United States established a protectorate over Cuba and acquired Puerto Rico as a colony. In the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt had proposed a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine; not only would the United States tolerate European colonization in the Western Hemisphere, but, if any nation in the region demonstrated either instability or an inability to govern itself, the United States would intervene and take over that nations government to prevent its falling into the hands of a European power. The United States did intervene, with military force, in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Panama. U.S. forces occupied the city of Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1915, and an expeditionary force tried to capture Francisco "Pancho" Villa the following year. In fact, a German offer to aid the Mexican government against the United States prompted the U.S. government to declare war against Germany in 1917.

It had been a long and complicated relationship, and continued American military involvement, along with economic domination by American business interests, had made many in Latin America wary of U.S. intentions, Franklin D. Roosevelt pledged a change, vowing to make the United States a good neighbor, rather than an overbearing bully, to the other nations of the hemisphere.

Was it a genuine change of policy, or just a rhetorical change of style? In these two essays, Jurgen Scheunemann and Erik Benson take differing views- Scheunemann, a specialist in twentieth-century American diplomacy, and generally a harsh critic of American policy, argues that Roosevelt did indeed change the dynamics of inter-American relations. Benson, a specialist in U.S., International Policy before World War II, argues that though the Good Neighbor Policy promised much, Roosevelt actually changed little. The United States simply modified its policies: it did not reverse them.

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Whenever a foreign policy is subjected to analysis, its real scope and significance can only be determined when placed within its historical context. This assessment holds especially true for Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which most scholars see as a well-meant attempt to change the pattern of a century of imperialist U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America, but that nevertheless fell short of providing a genuine new beginning. In addition, many historians note that it was not a new concept conceived by the Roosevelt administration, but merely a shift in political strategy because the traditional policy—military intervention and open diplomatic or economic pressure—had proven ineffective and costly. This general view, however, appears distorted when taking (and comparing) other periods of United States-Latin American relations, and, even more importantly, integrating the different dimensions of the Good Neighbor Policy. It would be unhistorical to judge Roosevelt's policy in absolute terms without acknowledging the general thinking of, his time and the often-narrow political possibilities he faced. It would also be politically naive to assume that the Roosevelt administration would completely abandon a goal-oriented, realistic foreign policy that primarily served American national interests. One must also acknowledge the sheer differences in size, power, economy, and unity among the countries of Latin America and the United States. In terms of foreign policy relations, the United States would always be the more powerful, and hence the more influential, neighbor. It is only then that the Good Neighbor Policy of Roosevelt and its implementation can be appreciated as a departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy
Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy was in fact a new start for United States-Latin American relations and ultimately laid the cornerstone for the policies of two later presidents.

Throughout the history of United States-Latin American relations, the southern hemisphere remained "beneath the United States," as political scientist Lars Schultz described it in Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America (1998). During the nineteenth century, in particular, the U.S. attitude toward its neighbors was marked by a feeling of racial and cultural superiority that found expression in a unilateral, often imperialistic, style of foreign policy. This attitude reached its climax under President Theodore Roosevelt and his "Big Stick" diplomacy. Latin America was largely considered the backyard of North America, where U.S. economic and political interests ruled undisturbed in the small and mostly dependent nations. When, in his first inaugural speech, Roosevelt pledged that the United States would become a "good neighbor," the promise was correctly perceived by the Latin American states as a new beginning. This promise was, by no means, a new grand design for a foreign policy. During FDR's two subsequent terms of office, as World War II raged across Europe and the Pacific, Latin America did not figure prominently on his foreign policy agenda. Instead, the Good Neighbor Policy resembled a set of small-scale policy initiatives that nevertheless, taken together, amounted to a new foreign policy. This approach had three elements: the policy of nonintervention, presumably the most significant departure from the actions of preceding administrations; the competing requirements of U.S. foreign policy during the 1930s; and the cultural dimensions of Roosevelt's policy.

U.S. intervention in Latin America emerged during the nineteenth century and, historically, has been defined by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. In a sense, the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 was just a modernized, yet aggressive, reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy was the first major shift in this orientation, because the concept of promoting democracy abroad was introduced as a crucial American goal in Latin America. It is equally striking, however, that Wilson had to rely on intervention to achieve his goals. One of his most significant dilemmas was how to achieve liberal goals, such as democracy and human rights, without the forced application of non-liberal tools. In this regard, even Wilson remained within the framework of traditional United States-Latin American relations.

Later, President Herbert Hoover—who actually spoke of a "good neighbor policy" in 1928 during a goodwill trip to South America—cautiously, began to change this policy by ordering the removal of American troops from Nicaragua and Haiti. This new approach, however, does not make him the father of the Good Neighbor Policy. It would be underestimating the multidimensionality of Roosevelt's new policy approach to interpret his Good Neighbor Policy as a simple continuation of Republican administration insights into the weaknesses of interventionist policies. The major difference between Roosevelt and his predecessors is that he created this pattern when he introduced the concept of nonintervention in Latin American countries, rightfully considered the essence of his administration's new agenda for the region. It is because of this change, and those discussed below, that Roosevelt's policy can be clearly set apart.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States had militarily intervened in many Latin American countries, most notably in Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Between 1898 and 1920, the U.S. Army and Navy intervened twenty times. But beginning in 1933, Calvin Coolidge's verdict that the U.S. government had the right and obligation to protect its interests in Latin America, by force if need be, was finally put to rest. During its first term, the Roosevelt administration revoked this policy publicly and denounced it as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America on several occasions, such as at the inter-American conference in Montevideo in 1933, when the United States signed the Convention on the Right and Duties of States, and the inter-American conference in Buenos Aires in 1936, where the United States signed the protocol on nonintervention. These two documents represented more than just signatures and political pledges: to the Latin American nations they marked the turnaround of the northern colossus; for U.S. foreign policy, they signaled a new beginning.

A good example for Roosevelt's new policy is the case of Cuba. When his administration revoked the Platt Amendment (1901) in 1934, it canceled one of its most important political and cultural (pseudo legal) justifications for intervention. Under the amendment, Cuba had been completely subjected to American influence and military power. The law had been used to justify three military interventions in Cuba (1906-1909, 1912, 1917-1922). In addition to abrogating the Platt Amendment, the Roosevelt administration took a different Foreign policy approach when, in 1931, Cuban dictator Gerardo
Machado y Morales suspended constitutionally guaranteed civil rights and stepped up the political repression of his people. The new U.S. ambassador to Cuba, Summer Wells, tried to persuade Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull to intervene militarily, but despite the still valid Platt Amendment, the administration did not make a move. However, it did pressure Machado to step down in the end. By and large, this situation also represented a severe setback for the support of democracy and human rights in the region. However, the United States had departed from its familiar pattern of foreign policy in the region, even though American (mostly private) economic interests were at stake.

A second question that arises in this context is the economic relationship between the United States and Latin America. The long-term results of World War I, and the rise of Nazi Germany that began in 1933, had led to a steady decline in U.S. economic influence in Latin America throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. By the end of the 1930s, American economic and political influence in the region faced new opposition, a fact that often overshadows the beginning of the policy. An integral part of the Good Neighbor Policy was intensified economic exchange between the region and the United States. The Roosevelt administration did not actually attempt to give up or diminish U.S. economic leverage in Latin America. Instead, it tried to change its nature and shift its overall focus. Given strong German economic and military influence in some Latin and South American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala, and others, this new U.S. strategy served three purposes: to reaffirm American economic power in the region; to establish a greater level of economic partnership; and (beginning in 1939) to reduce and ultimately destroy the German war machine by pressuring Latin American countries to terminate exports to Nazi Germany. On the one hand, this might be considered classic "carrot and stick" diplomacy, but in the end it spawned a different approach to economic ties between North and South America. The single most important step was the establishment of the Import-Export Bank in 1934, which was originally founded to funnel loans to U.S. exporters. By 1940 it also served as an institution for granting loans to Latin American governments, which in fact was tantamount to direct financial U.S. government assistance. This measure obviously served American interests: the loans increased Latin America's dependence on the United States. At the same time, however, it stabilized the region economically, supported development in some countries, and ultimately proved a tentative precursor for subsequent U.S. development aid in the aftermath of World War II.

By the same token, in a desperate effort to increase U.S. exports in the wake of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration tried to negotiate bilateral trade agreements, most of which focused on reducing or abolishing tariffs with many Latin American countries. But the United States was unable to sign trade agreements with Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay (to name only the most important ones). This suggests that these countries were not economically dependent on U.S. exports, and, more importantly, it demonstrates how times had changed. The process of these trade negotiations, and their failure in some instances, is evidence of how the Good Neighbor Policy was a new departure. The United States did use economic and diplomatic pressure to reach agreements with countries such as Cuba in 1936, and officially boycotted Mexican and Bolivian oil exports; but it ultimately limited itself to employing means it regarded as ethical in international negotiations between sovereign states. In Bolivia and Mexico, where American oil companies were nationalized in 1937 and 1938, the United States accepted the new status quo without intervening. This strategy represented another novel aspect of the Good Neighbor Policy. The United States showed the same new attitude during negotiations for a multilateral, inter-American financial institution. In the course of the talks, which, in 1940, ultimately failed, it became clear that Latin American and U.S. economic interests were diametrically opposed. While attempting to impose its interests on the other nations in the negotiations, the United States finally had to back down in the face of Latin American resistance. The balance of power had not really changed; but these countries had obviously gained self-confidence, and the U.S. willingness to peacefully accept it, was in fact new.

The promotion of trade and economic assistance against the background of the war fought in Europe suggests the third issue, namely the cultural dimensions of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. Both in speeches and deed, the Roosevelt administration attempted to establish a common cultural identity that the United States and Latin American countries could share. This common identity presumably included free trade, democracy, and a certain moral superiority over Fascist Europe. It implicitly denounced communism an alternative, however. This idea of a "West hemisphere,"
which was to gain a new and extremely important significance in the 1980s, not only drew Latin American countries closer to the United States and its political beliefs, but also helped create a pan-American community.

Often neglected in this regard—but hardly to be underestimated—are the direct propaganda efforts of the U.S. during the late 1930s and 1940s against the strong influence Nazi Germany exerted in the region. In late 1940, the U.S. government opened a special office in the State Department, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA). Headed by Nelson A. Rockefeller, its annual budget rose to $45 million by the end of the war. The office published magazines in both English and Spanish, aired radio programs, and distributed American movies and literature. All of these efforts were part of the Good Neighbor Policy. Despite the fact that some of these programs were ideologically biased (for example, some movies and literary works critical of U.S. culture were not shown), they were nevertheless the expression of a new policy. Instead of sending troops, the United States now employed more sophisticated, and ultimately more democratic, means. Rather than using force, it applied rhetoric as an instrument of its foreign policy in Latin America.

It is true that Roosevelt did not basically challenge the general U.S. approach to Latin America or the U.S. companies' interests, nor did he repudiate U.S. strategic and economic stakes in Latin America. But he nevertheless did more than just promote a strategic shift to presumably reach the same goals. He gradually changed both the U.S. attitude toward, and therefore the relationship with, the states of the Southern Hemisphere. One long-lasting and negative outcome of this policy, however, was the establishment of dictatorships throughout Latin America. This was the result not only of prior military interventions without clear political strategies for the countries involved, but also Roosevelt's resistance to using force to uphold democracy. After World War II, most American presidents did not appreciate or continue Roosevelt's policy. The global setting and American interests during the Cold War prevented a true Good Neighbor Policy from being carried out. Interventions continued with presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Richard M. Nixon. President Jimmy Carter was the first postwar president to try and redefine United States-Latin American relations according to Roosevelt precepts and to act as a good neighbor. To a certain degree, President Bill Clinton has also attempted to follow his Democratic predecessors. On the other hand, although Carter's successor, Ronald W. Reagan, largely reversed this policy and, nearly half a century after Roosevelt, even increased the pace of intervention, his actions did not in the least diminish the historic significance of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy.

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References


