

1901-1934: “Yankee Imperialism” in Latin America

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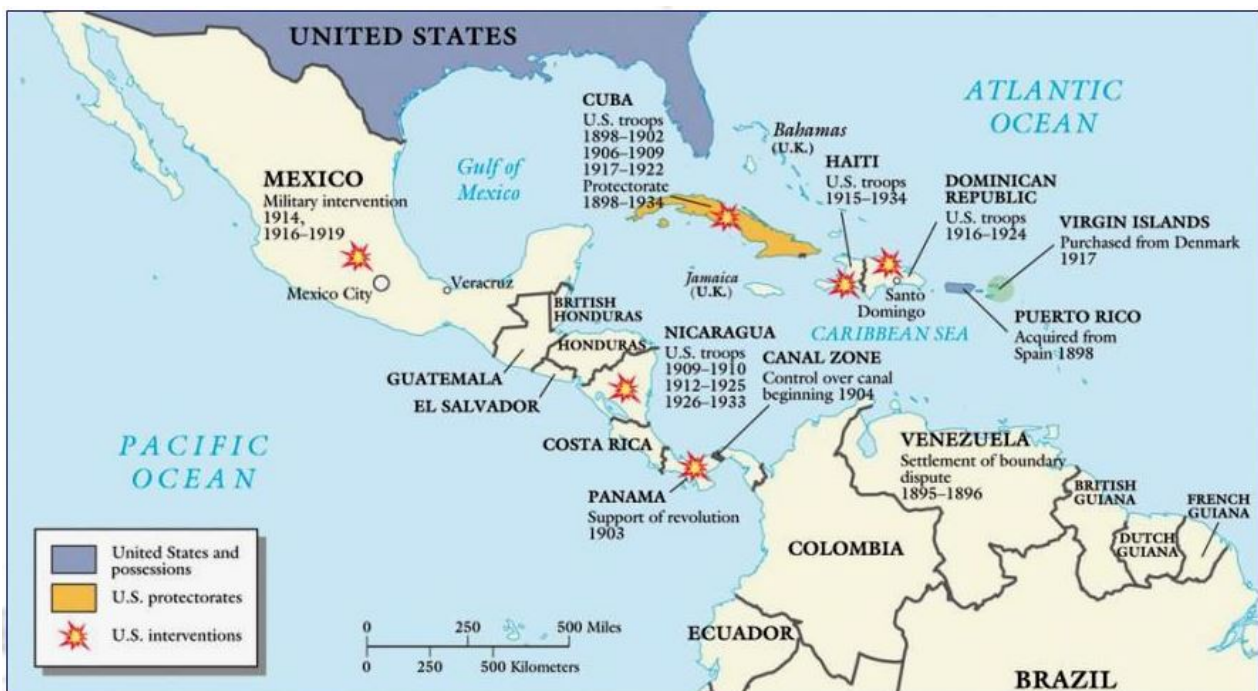
1. *To obtain the right to build a canal, the United States covertly supported a secessionist revolt in the Panamanian province of Colombia in November 1903.*
2. *President Theodore Roosevelt declared in December 1904 that the United States had the right and responsibility to militarily intervene in other nations of the Western Hemisphere in order to correct “chronic wrongdoing.”^[1]*
3. *Between 1900 and 1930, American private and corporate investments in Latin America increased from \$280 million to \$5.3 billion, surpassing investments in Europe. U.S. administrations repeatedly vowed to protect these assets and open doors for more.^[2]*
4. *During the first two decades of the 20th century, the U.S. made “protectorates” of Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Haiti, taking control of their finances, limiting their sovereignty, and periodically sending in troops.*
5. *To secure a pro-U.S. government in Nicaragua, President William Howard Taft first supported a revolution in 1909, then supported the suppression of a revolution in 1912.*
6. *President Woodrow Wilson famously declared in April 1917 that the “world must be made safe for democracy,” but his message was not meant for what he called the “politically undeveloped races.” His administration established and maintained authoritarian governments in Haiti and the Dominican Republic under U.S. military command.^[3]*
7. *The U.S. occupations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic sparked guerrilla wars that took the lives of 290 U.S. Marines, over 3,000 Haitians, and an unknown number of Dominicans.^[4]*
8. *From January 1921 to February 1923, General Enoch H. Crowder, as “special representative of the President,” ruled Cuba by decree, issuing orders from the USS Minnesota in the Havana harbor.*

9. Civil rights, peace, and progressive activists in the United States organized campaigns to end U.S. occupations in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, working with anti-imperialist allies in Latin America.
10. Latin Americans persistently challenged U.S. interventionism, or “Yankee imperialism,” finally persuading U.S. leaders to adopt the principle of non-intervention at the Seventh Inter-American Conference in December 1933, which became known in the U.S. as the Good Neighbor Policy.

I. Introduction

On June 20, 1898, as U.S. troops prepared to land in Cuba to “pacify” the island, Assistant Secretary of State Francis Loomis held forth on the larger implications of the U.S. intervention. Writing to his boss, Secretary of State William Day, Loomis declared, “I think it our destiny to control more or less directly most all of the Latin American countries.”

One means to this end was economic domination. “It is possible to attain commercial ascendancy in them in much the same way that England does in China,” wrote Loomis, “that is, by lending them money and administering their revenues.” Another was political annexation. “I am glad it is to fall to the lot of this administration to strengthen our country by adding to its domain the islands that we may need to sustain ourselves as one of the foremost nations of the earth and the soon-to-be leading one in every good sense of the term.”^[5]



U.S. military interventions in Latin America, 1895-1930s

As the 19th century came to a close, the United States embarked on a new mission of empire-building. It was new in the sense that it involved overseas rather than continental expansion, and that it allied with financial and commercial interests rather than land-hungry settlers. U.S. leaders did not join the European “scramble” for African colonies, but they did vie for influence and territorial acquisitions in Asia and the Pacific, and they pursued outright dominance in the Central American-Caribbean region.

The War of 1898 against Spain provided the catalyst for an overseas empire, as the U.S. gained the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as the spoils of war (see [The War of 1898](#)). Still, the U.S. was playing catch-up in the imperial competition for colonies, markets, and spheres of influence. By 1900, European nations had colonized 90% of Africa, the whole of the Indian subcontinent, and much of Southeast Asia.

U.S. leaders pursued dominance in the Central American-Caribbean region through economic, diplomatic, and military pressure, including military interventions and occupations. They claimed that their goals and policies were benevolent and necessary to preserve civilized order. Most Latin Americans, however, regarded U.S. interventionism as “Yankee imperialism.”

The era is framed by two opposing doctrines, the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which set forth the rationales for U.S. military intervention in Latin America, and the Good Neighbor Policy of 1933, which countermanded the Roosevelt Corollary and upheld the principle of noninterventionism.

This essay tells the story of “Yankee imperialism” in the Central American-Caribbean region during the first third of the 20th century.^[6] It analyzes U.S. motives and rationales, surveys the policies and doctrines of successive U.S. administrations, and examines six case studies of U.S. occupations – in Cuba, Panama, Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. The final section explores what lessons might be drawn from this history.

II. U.S. motives and rationales

U.S. motives for overseas expansion were similar to those of other imperial powers – military and geostrategic advantage, economic gain, political control, and international prestige – but U.S. leaders were disinclined toward permanent colonies and furthermore refused to admit to any imperial intentions. The political ideology of the United States, after all, was and is directly contrary to the object of imperialism – control over other lands and peoples without their consent. “Throughout its history,” writes the historian Jerald A. Combs, “the United States has been wary of the idea of imperialism. Americans have prided themselves on the fact that their revolution was the first successful rebellion against European colonialism.”^[7]

U.S. leaders past and present have played down the contradiction as well as mischievously twisted American principles into conformity. As an example of the latter, on July 12, 1900, as U.S. forces fought a war to suppress Filipino independence, President William McKinley told the American people that the United States was bravely engaged in the liberation of ten million Filipinos “from the yoke of imperialism.” Again, in May 1901, he assured U.S. soldiers in San Francisco returning from the war that there was “no imperialism but that of the sovereign power of the American people.”^[8] The principles of freedom and democracy, as such, were conflated with American control, as if flying the Stars and Stripes over a foreign country made it free.



1904 Cartoon by William Allen Rogers (Granger Collection)

According to the historian William I. Cohen, the American public's "traditional anti-imperialism required that empire be disguised and rationalized." U.S. leaders disguised their empire-building in Asia in part by promising "eventual independence for the Philippines, after appropriate tutelage." They disguised it in Latin America by employing "the concept of 'protectorate,' clearly not a colony, [which] facilitated American hegemony in the Caribbean."^[9] During the first two decades of the 20th century, the U.S. made protectorates of Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Haiti.

U.S. leaders also rationalized their budding empire on the basis of race. Woodrow Wilson, a political science professor at Princeton University before he was elected president, explained in September 1900 that the principle of the "consent of the governed" need not apply to "the affairs of politically undeveloped races, which have not yet learned the rudiments of order and self-control." Thus, he concluded, the "'consent' of the Filipinos and the 'consent' of the American colonists to government, for example, are two radically different things."^[10] Wilson's racially-tinged view of political rights was validated by the Supreme Court in *Insular Cases* (1901), which held that people living in subjugated territories had no guarantee of Constitutional rights.

Among the "undeveloped races," in the view of many Anglo Americans, was the population of Latin America, a melting pot of European, Native American, and African peoples. In 1821 Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote of Latin Americans that there was "no prospect that they would establish free or liberal institutions of government. . . . Arbitrary power, military and ecclesiastical, was stamped upon their habits, and upon all their

institutions.”^[11] Francis Loomis, who also served as ambassador to Venezuela from 1897 to 1901, warned his colleagues in the State Department, “one thing that I have learned . . . is to place no belief in the word of a man of Latin race if he may have anything to gain by lying. This may be laid down as a rule.”^[12] General Leonard Wood, who served as U.S. military governor of Cuba, described the Cuban people in 1900 as “a race that has steadily been going down for a hundred years.” Hence, in his view, it would take many years of American instruction to realize “an enlightened community for self-government.”^[13]



“Everyone gets his share.” French caricature of the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, with German leader Otto Bismarck dividing Africa like a cake.

U.S. leaders were not unique in framing their imperial enterprises in noble terms while depreciating the dispossessed as deserving of their fate. Both the British and French rationalized their extensive empires as a “civilizing mission,” claiming a duty to enlighten the so-called “lesser races.” As the cultural critic Edward Said wrote, “impressive ideological formations” were constructed that “allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated”; indeed, that the imperial nations had an “almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior or less advanced peoples.”^[14] Imperial governments, in other words, sought to convince citizens at home that imperialism was necessary and just, irrespective of any material benefits that might be gained (which generally accrued to the wealthy). The British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling added a caveat in his enigmatic poem, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands,” published in February 1899. He advised Americans to “Take up the White Man’s burden,” meaning imperialism, but forewarned them not to expect gratitude from their “new-caught, sullen peoples.”^[15]

Three goals

One major difference between the British colonial empire and the informal, neocolonial U.S. empire was that the U.S. lacked a Colonial Office to systematize its operations and train its administrators. U.S. interventions and occupations were haphazard and eclectic, by contrast, and often administered by military men with little understanding of the people and culture over whom they held power. Each intervention was a new experiment involving varying degrees of control and negotiation. The common denominators were securing U.S. geopolitical hegemony and advancing and protecting private U.S. economic interests. These two goals, in turn, compelled a third – securing a stable political order conducive to the first two objectives.

Regarding the first goal, U.S. geopolitical hegemony in the Central American-Caribbean region moved forward after War of 1898 with the acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone in 1903. U.S. leaders henceforth claimed the region as an exclusive U.S. sphere of military and political influence, colloquially referred to as “our backyard.” The degree of force employed and control exerted varied from country to country. U.S. military forces occupied for short periods of time Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica; and for long periods, Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic (reviewed in Section IV). Armed resistance in the latter three countries prompted one-sided counter-insurgency wars that killed thousands and terrorized rural communities.

In countries where the U.S. retained significant control, occupational authorities also initiated beneficial projects to improve sanitation, build roads, systematize governmental operations, and reduce “corruption.” Such projects, however, were compromised by their integration into larger schemes of bureaucratic and economic centralization that enhanced foreign control and undermined local autonomy and traditional patronage systems – typically described as “corruption” by occupational authorities. The U.S. essentially replaced indigenous “political spoils” systems with one of its own that favored foreign interests, economic elites, and accommodating political parties.

On the economic front, American corporations and investors operated in Latin America with and without the assistance of the U.S. government, although the latter always stood in the shadows, prepared to intervene if threats to American assets arose. Between 1900 and 1909, private American investments in Latin America quadrupled from about \$280 million to over \$1 billion.^[16] “By the end of the 1920s,” writes the historian Louis Pérez, “U.S. investments in Latin America had reached \$5.3 billion, two-thirds of which were in the form of direct investment in properties and the balance in securities.... the U.S. capital stake in Latin America had surpassed investments in Europe.”^[17]

Foreign (U.S.) investors bought up arable land, developed large agricultural plantations and mining operations, built and owned railroads, port facilities, and public utilities, controlled banking, loans, and credit, and bought off politicians to secure their holdings. American-owned commercial empires were created through the export of bananas from Central American republics, sugar from Cuba, and oil from Mexico.



Puerto Castilla, Honduras, circa 1920s (United Fruit Company photo collection, Harvard)

In contrast to U.S. domestic society, where business and government frequently battled over laws and regulations, business and government interests aligned in the pursuit of American hegemony in Latin America. Woodrow Wilson, before becoming president, argued in 1907 that the U.S. government should protect and advance American commercial and financial interests in foreign lands:

Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process.^[18]

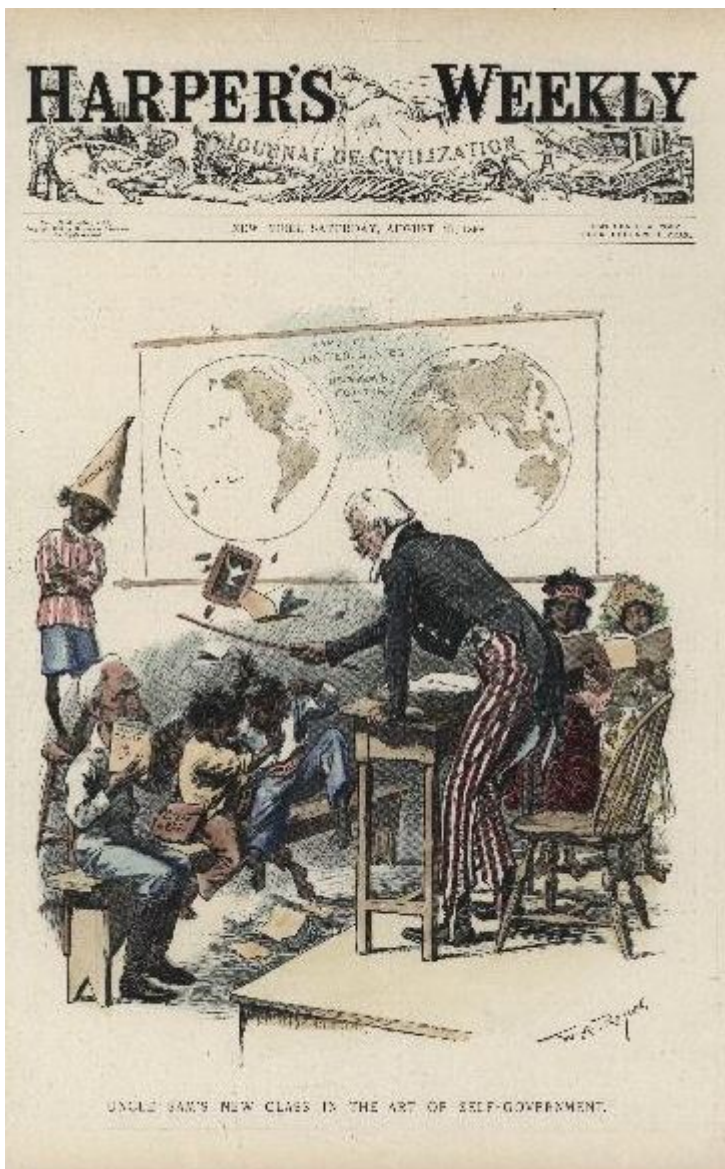
In economics as in politics, in Wilson's view, American expansion abroad could safely ignore "the consent of the governed." For reasons mentioned, however, America's commercial imperialism needed to be disguised by "impressive ideological formations." The major one, an economic offshoot of the imperial "civilizing mission," held that foreign capitalist investment would assist poor countries in developing their resources and improving the quality of life for the masses.

To the contrary, writes Jerald Combs, "Most Latin American countries began to concentrate on one or two cash crops or natural resources that might be exchanged in the United States for manufactured items and luxury goods. The upper classes might benefit from this trade and from the American investments and loans that made possible the railroads, port facilities, and public utilities necessary to commerce; few peasants did."^[19] In the Central American-Caribbean region, in particular, U.S. corporations such as the United Fruit Company became so powerful as to restructure whole economies to suit their interests and

profits. According to Pérez:

The exercise of hegemony created an auspicious environment for U.S. investment in the region. Capital carried its own set of imperatives. Investors demanded specific conditions, including access to resources, assurances of protection, and guarantees of profit. Capital demanded, too, a docile working class, a passive peasantry, a compliant bourgeoisie, and a subservient political elite.^[20]

As American corporate and financial investments increased, so did the efforts of U.S. leaders to control the governments, leaders, and policies of nations in the region. U.S. control was most often exercised through alliances with strongmen, or caudillos, such as Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, Manuel Estrada Cabrera in Guatemala, and Adolfo Díaz in Nicaragua. Sometimes the U.S. forced regime change, as in the overthrow of President José Santos Zelaya in Nicaragua in 1909. At other times, the U.S. mediated disputes between rival political factions and organized relatively fair elections, as in Cuba in 1908 and Nicaragua in 1928. This last option, of course, was in keeping with U.S. democratic principles. Yet democratic governance was not the first U.S. priority and often not a priority at all.



“Uncle Sam’s new class in the art of self-government.” Harper’s Weekly, August 1898, lampoons a standard rationale for U.S. empire-building (source: Univ. of Hawaii at Manoa)

U.S. leaders commonly embellished their goal of political stability with democratic idealism. Political order, it was said, would be secured through democratically elected governments that would respond to the will of the people and perhaps implement policies for the common good. Such idealism was not necessarily insincere, but it failed to recognize the inherent contradiction of the U.S. position in seeking to impose its will on other nations while extolling the virtues of democracy. U.S. economic interests were generally more comfortable with “strongmen” they could manipulate rather than democratic governments that would act in the interest of the poor majority, restricting foreign ownership and exploitation.

This is not to say that democratic governance would have been achieved if the U.S. had not intervened, but rather that there was a wide gap between American practices and professed principles. For the most part, the U.S. supported strongman governments that would accommodate U.S. business and political demands. In Cuba and Nicaragua, where the U.S. once organized elections, U.S. leaders later supported the dictatorial regimes of Fulgencio Batista and Anastasio Somoza, respectively. Democratic idealism was nonetheless useful for eliciting U.S. public support for U.S. interventions abroad, with failure blamed on the “politically underdeveloped” citizens of the countries under occupation.

The U.S. goal of political stability was never achieved in any country for any substantial amount of time. The U.S. operational formula, it may be seen, was fundamentally flawed. First, the compliant national leaders chosen by Washington were rarely supported by the people – one source of instability. Second, the economic arrangements imposed by the U.S. favored foreigners and upper classes over the masses – a deeper source of instability. Third, the possibility of structural economic reforms through government in the interest of the masses – similar to Progressive and New Deal reforms in the United States – was discouraged, thwarted, and repressed by U.S. officials, thus making insurrections more likely. Fourth, occupying U.S. authorities and troops were often haughty and prejudiced, treating local populations with disdain, thus creating ill-will in social relations. Finally, even when egos were soothed, the mere fact that foreigners had come to rule and dominate was a persistent source of resentment and rebellion. As Combs writes:

When Americans served abroad in positions of authority as factory owners, colonial officials, teachers, and missionaries, they often aroused nationalistic hostilities. American troops stationed in foreign countries caused special difficulties. Most soldiers were uneducated and unsophisticated. They regarded foreigners as strange and inferior and treated them as such. Consequently, American military intervention often created more problems than it solved.^[21]

Military intervention was a means to the desired goals of geopolitical hegemony, economic profit, and an amenable political order. It was also used to protect citizens living abroad, although this justification was more often an excuse. Prior to the 20th century, it was common practice for foreign governments to send military forces into countries to secure their interests. When Honduras defaulted on loan repayments in the 1870s, the British bombarded a port. When a German national was arrested in Haiti in 1897, the Kaiser sent two warships to Port-au-Prince to demand not only his release but also an indemnity of \$20,000 or the town would be bombarded. The Haitians acceded to both demands.^[22] In the early 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt sent U.S. troops to take over the

customhouses of the Dominican Republic in order to secure the repayment of foreign debts. As the U.S. edged out its European economic competitors in the 1910s, U.S. military interventions in the Central American-Caribbean region became more frequent, with some turning into long occupations.

Those interventions earned the U.S. the moniker of “the Colossus of the North” in Latin America. Most Latin Americans rejected the notion that the U.S. had the right to intervene in their sovereign nations. Nor did they believe that the U.S. had the right to dominate the hemisphere, whether by military force or financial leverage.

Many U.S. citizens, though not a majority, were also sharply critical of U.S. interventionism in Latin America. They assailed interventionism as contrary to American principles of freedom and democracy, inimical to the ideals of peace and international law, and of benefit to a small financial elite rather than the broad American public, let alone the invaded countries. Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation*, put the matter simply in December 1916, writing that “no man is good enough to govern others without their consent.”^[23]

Due in large part to international and domestic criticism, the U.S. government formally ended its policy of military interventionism in Latin America in 1933. According to Louis Pérez, “Three decades of intervention had provided neither political stability nor economic security. On the contrary, intervention had created widespread hostility in Latin America.”^[24]

In December 1933, at the Seventh International Conference of American States in Montevideo, Uruguay, Latin American governments proposed a convention stating that “no state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another.” Five years earlier, the U.S. had rejected a similar proposal, but this time Secretary of State Cordell Hull signed the measure, hoping to regain the trust of Latin Americans.^[25] The new Good Neighbor Policy, as it was called, did not curtail U.S. economic influence nor lend support to democratic governance, but it did remove one major impediment to better relations with Latin America: military interventionism.

III. Overview of U.S. administrations

President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) was fond of quoting the West African proverb, “Speak softly and carry a big stick – you will go far.”^[26] He extolled the virtues of the “strenuous life” and even engaged in boxing matches at the White House. His most notable foreign policy initiative was the use of “gunboat diplomacy” – a euphemism for coercion – to secure the secession of Panama from the Republic of Colombia in 1903, thus enabling the U.S. to build a transoceanic canal through the isthmus (reviewed in Part IV). During his time in office, Roosevelt also sent U.S. troops and naval forces to the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Cuba.

In December 1904, Roosevelt offered a broad justification for establishing U.S. hegemony in the region, known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. In the excerpt below, Roosevelt asserts the right and responsibility of the U.S. to intervene in other nations:

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 [the Americas], 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.^[27]



The *New York Daily World*, 1904, portrays Roosevelt's "big stick" policies as trampling on international law and the U.S. Constitution

Roosevelt's doctrine was more a contradiction than a "corollary" to the original Monroe Doctrine of 1823, if the meanings are understood. The older doctrine warned European nations not to extend their colonial empires in the Americas while still allowing for existing colonies to remain.^[28] It thus offered rhetorical support for the sovereignty of newly formed nations in South and Central America. The Roosevelt Corollary, in contrast, *undermined* Latin American sovereignty by asserting the right of the U.S. to unilaterally intervene. Roosevelt's claim that the U.S. would act as "an international police power" was entirely made up, a fiction, as there was no international law or institutions that supported this policeman role. Nor did the concept of "chronic wrongdoing" have any legal legitimacy. It was a pliable, amorphous rationale that allowed U.S. leaders to use it as they saw fit. Under the Roosevelt Corollary, the U.S. assumed the roles of prosecutor, judge, jury, and

executioner, and accorded no rights to the accused.

Another contradiction of the Roosevelt Corollary was that United States' interventions did not always support law and order, the usual role of a policeman. On a number of occasions, before and after the doctrine was announced, the U.S. intervened in other countries to assist rebellions or overthrow existing governments – in Cuba in 1898, Panama in 1903, Nicaragua in 1909, and Mexico in 1914. As with the principle of democracy, U.S. leaders enforced “law and order” when it served their perceived interests.

The announcement of the Roosevelt Corollary was catalyzed in part by the need to justify recent U.S. actions in the Dominican Republic. In January 1904, Roosevelt ordered U.S. Marines to Santo Domingo, the capital of the country, and two other cities, citing a need “to protect American life and property.” There were disturbances in the streets, to be sure, but the main purpose of the intervention was to prevent European creditors from enforcing their financial claims against the Dominican government. The Dominican Republic was \$32 million in debt to foreign creditors, with the largest amount owed to the New York-based Santo Domingo Improvement Company. Two years earlier, Germany, Britain, and France had pressured Venezuela to repay loans by blockading Venezuelan ports and sinking some gunboats. Roosevelt sought to avoid similar actions against the Dominican Republic, while establishing U.S. dominance.

In July 1904, Washington officials designated the Santo Domingo Improvement Company as the financial agent over the Dominican Republic's customhouses, the main source of national income (import duties). Of the money collected, 45 percent was slated for the Dominican Republic's governmental expenditures and the rest for foreign creditors. The U.S. thus acted as an agent for all creditor nations even as it asserted its dominant role. A majority of the Dominican population opposed the U.S. takeover of customhouses, according to American minister Thomas Dawson, but the republic's president, Carlos Morales, went along with the plan in exchange for U.S. support for his leadership. To deter any disruption, U.S. naval ships patrolled the Dominican waters.^[29]

The Taft administration

President William Howard Taft (1909-1913) placed more emphasis than his predecessor on promoting private U.S. economic interests. He publicized his program as substituting “dollars for bullets,” but his main goal was to substitute American dollars for English pounds, German marcs, and French francs. His administration, in other words, sought to replace European capital with American capital, thereby attaining financial dominance in the region. In 1914, the total nominal value of foreign investments in Latin America was \$8.5 billion, divided as follows: Great Britain \$3.7 billion; United States \$1.7 billion; France \$1.2 billion; Germany \$0.9 billion; and others \$1.0 billion.^[30] Taft's de facto alliance with large New York banks prompted the *New York World* to anoint his policy “dollar diplomacy” in 1910.^[31]

The Taft administration, however, did not forego gunboats and bullets. In 1909, he ordered U.S. Marines into Nicaragua to support a Conservative rebellion against the Liberal Zelaya government that had failed to follow U.S. dictates. The U.S. subsequently established a customs collectorship modeled after that of the Dominican Republic and facilitated a \$1.5 million loan that gave Wall Street banks ownership of the Nicaraguan national bank, the

national railroad, and a steamship company. In 1912, U.S. Marines were sent once more, this time to protect the Conservative, pro-U.S. government of Adolfo Díaz from a Liberal rebellion. Now the protector of law and order, Taft characterized the rebellion as “sheer lawlessness on the part of the malcontents.”^[32] A 100-man Marine guard remained in Nicaragua until 1925 to prevent further challenges to the U.S.-supported government.

In his final address to Congress on December 3, 1912, President Taft characterized his administration’s foreign policy as “one that appeals alike to idealistic humanitarian sentiments, to the dictates of sound policy and strategy, and to legitimate commercial aims. It is an effort frankly directed to the increase of American trade upon the axiomatic principle that the Government of the United States shall extend all proper support to every legitimate and beneficial American enterprise abroad.”^[33]

Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin was among those who questioned the presumed benefits of American investments in foreign lands. A leader in the progressive reform movement, La Follette challenged corporate prerogatives both at home and abroad. According to the historian Padraic Kennedy:

La Follette argued that extensive overseas investment drained necessary capital from the United States; raised interest rates to the disadvantage of the average businessman and ultimately, therefore, to the consumer; necessitated too large and expensive an army and navy; led to armed intervention and international strife; crushed democratic movements in backward nations and reduced their peoples to economic servitude. In short, La Follette held that the profits enjoyed by the “special interests” were absolutely no justification for economic imperialism since they brought neither equitably higher wages, lower prices, nor a better standard of living to the common people either at home or abroad.^[34]

The progressive reform movement was strong enough to push back against corporate prerogatives on the home front, but it was much weaker in challenging the business-government collusion in foreign policymaking. The so-called “legitimate commercial aims” of the Boston-based United Fruit Company, to take one example, included purchasing large amounts of land in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica, developing railroads and ports mainly for the export of bananas and coffee, establishing low-wage, non-union labor systems, and maneuvering to influence the government of these so-called “banana republics.” According to the historian Paul J. Dosal, “Once United invested millions of dollars in plantations, railroads, and wharves, it was understandably reluctant to withdraw until it recovered its investment. United’s lobbyists therefore cultivated close relations with the political establishment, offering the bribes and entertainment that local politicians demanded in return for their ongoing support of the banana industry.”^[35]

The Wilson administration

President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) expanded U.S. interventionism in deference to both geopolitical concerns and economic interests. He is best known for his uplifting rhetoric, dubbed “missionary diplomacy,” which framed U.S. interventionism in the most benevolent of terms. Only a week in office, Wilson issued a statement announcing that “the chief

objects of my administration will be to cultivate the friendship ... of our sister republics of Central and South America, and to promote in every proper way the interests which are common to the peoples of the two continents."^[36] He went on to declare his earnest desire for cooperation, mutual respect, lawful and honest government, and peace.

Beyond platitudes, however, Wilson offered no major policy changes. He continued Taft's financial policies, despite criticizing them, seeking to pry open doors for American entrepreneurs and enforce loan collections. Wilson proved even more zealous than his predecessors in employing military force, dispatching U.S. troops to Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Panama, Honduras, and Nicaragua. According to the historians Lester D. Langley and Thomas Schoonover, "Wilson tightened the nation's economic and political grip over its tropical empire, even as he denounced imperialism."^[37]

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson spoke before a joint session of Congress seeking a declaration of war against Germany. The immediate cause was the sinking of American merchant vessels trading with Great Britain by German submarines. Wilson sought to buttress his case by appealing to American idealism, famously proclaiming that the "world must be made safe for democracy." Americans, he said, would "fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts - for democracy . . . for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free."^[38]



Women's suffrage was also left out of President Wilson' democratic idealism. National Woman's Party members picket in front of the White House, 1916 (National Park Service).

Wilson's message of freedom and democracy was designed to rouse the American people

against the semi-authoritarian German state. It was not meant for the so-called “politically undeveloped races.” Indeed, the Wilson administration was at that very time operating authoritarian governments in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, replete with martial law, censorship, and repression. One American living in the Dominican Republic, John Vance, wrote in 1920, “The Dominicans have not had the slightest instruction in self-government. On the contrary, they have had a very strong lesson in government by force, something they were already well schooled in.”^[39] Under Wilson, the gap between American idealistic rhetoric and foreign policy practices widened to a chasm.

Critics in Latin America, writing in journals such as *El Repertorio Americano* of San José, Costa Rica, and in newspapers such as *El Tiempo* of Bogotá, *El Universal* of Mexico City, and *La Prensa* and *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, assailed U.S. interventionism for both its violations of national sovereignty and its abusive conduct.^[40] Dana G. Monro of the Latin American Division of the State Department wrote in 1918, “Our Caribbean policy had aroused much unfriendly feeling toward the United States in other parts of the Continent.... Moreover, they bitterly resented what they described as our pretension to the hegemony of the Western Hemisphere.” Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, however, acknowledged no errors on the part of the United States, only ruing the bad publicity the U.S. was getting. Each U.S. intervention, he wrote, “has been used by the enemies and critics of the United States as proof positive that we are an imperialistic people prone to use our power in subverting the independence of our neighbors. And these accusations, however unjustified, have damaged our good name, our credits, and our trade far beyond the apprehension of our own people.”^[41]

The Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations

The cataclysmic Great War (World War I) took the lives of ten million people worldwide, including 116,000 Americans. In its aftermath, the public mood shifted toward antiwar, anti-imperialist, and isolationist sentiments. Many citizens viewed imperialism as a major cause of the war and a growing number suspected “imperialistic motives” behind U.S. interventionism in Latin America.^[42] Scott Nearing and Joseph Freeman^[42] offered evidence for the latter in their book, *Dollar Diplomacy: A Study in American Imperialism* (1925). The authors described how private business investments in other countries had led the U.S. government to extend its sovereignty “over populations that had expressed no desire for its presence.”^[43] American citizens were picking up the tab for these overseas operations while capitalist investors were enjoying the benefits.

The growing strength of arguments *against* U.S. interventionism was complemented by the weakening of arguments *for* it. The geopolitical argument that the U.S. needed to protect the Central American-Caribbean region from European encroachment virtually evaporated after the war, as the U.S. held clear military dominance. The argument that new markets abroad would increase prosperity at home had yet to be proven and was furthermore challenged by the progressive idea that prosperity at home could be increased by building a larger middle class through better wages and a more equal distribution of income and wealth. Some still believed in the American “civilizing mission,” but the mission in Haiti and the Dominican Republic had become one of grim and bloody repression, revealed in Senate hearings between August 1921 and June 1922.

Among the notable critics of U.S. interventionism in the 1920s was Samuel Guy Inman,

secretary of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America, based in New York City.^[44] His article, "Imperialistic America," published in the July 1924 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, suggested that the U.S. was no better than the Old World empires. "North America's imperialism in the Caribbean may shock some readers," he wrote:

In the smaller countries of the South, controlled by our soldiers, our bankers, and our oil kings, we are developing our Irelands, our Egypts, and our Indias.... Run your eyes rapidly down the map and note the countries where the United States is now in practical control. And remember that this control always brings resentment and enmity among the people, though their officials may approve it.... Out of the twenty Latin-American republics, eleven of them now have their financial policies directed by North Americans officially appointed. Six of these ten have the financial agents backed by American military forces on the ground.... Four of the remaining half of these Southern countries have their economic and fiscal life closely tied to the United States through large loans and concessions, giving special advantages to American capitalists.... We are piling up hatreds, suspicions, records for exploitation and destruction of sovereignty in Latin America.... Only in the United States do the press and the people ignore how our economic imperialism is eliminating friendships and fostering suspicions.^[45]

Inman's article "had a massive impact throughout Latin America," according to the historian Alan McPherson, so great that the U.S. State Department assigned Sumner Welles of the Latin American division to respond in the same magazine. In an article titled, "Is America Imperialistic?" published in September 1924, Welles argued that U.S. interventions were necessary in countries that had yet to develop "a firm tradition of orderly, constitutional government," and that U.S. troops would leave once this mission was accomplished, citing Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic as examples of countries where U.S. troops were departing at that time.^[46] Welles thus maintained the assumption, contained in the Roosevelt Corollary, that U.S. had the right and responsibility to judge whether other nations had proper governments and, if not, to militarily intervene to set things right without the consent of the governed; and that the primary motive of the U.S. was indeed the cultivation of democratic institutions rather than the advancement of U.S. economic and geopolitical interests.

Although enthusiasm for U.S. interventionism waned under Presidents Warren Harding (1921-23), Calvin Coolidge (1923-29), and Herbert Hoover (1929-33), it was not readily discontinued. From the point of view of U.S. officials, the problem was how to exit occupied countries without sacrificing U.S. economic interests or U.S. prestige as a great power. In 1922, Harding's Secretary of State, Charles Evan Hughes, assured the National Chamber of Commerce that the government would continue to protect overseas investments. "The Department is carrying the flag of the 20th century," he said. "It aims to be responsive in its own essential sphere to what it recognizes as the imperative demands of American business."^[47]

During the Harding administration, a lobbying campaign backed by Latin American states successfully pressed an agreement to end the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic, resulting in the departure of U.S. troops in July 1924. In Haiti, however, the U.S. occupation continued, due in part to American white prejudice toward the black and mixed race population - deemed incapable of self-government without U.S. tutelage - and in part to

American bondholders having a large stake in the Haitian national bank and wanting to maintain financial control.

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, a new U.S. intervention began in December 1926, followed by a lengthy counterinsurgency war. Fighting had broken out between Liberals and Conservatives, and the Coolidge administration sent the Marines to restore order. Perhaps learning from past interventions, the U.S. did not prop up one side against the other, but instead sent diplomats to mediate a truce between the belligerents, followed by supervised elections. One liberal general, Augusto César Sandino, however, rejected the truce and rebelled against the presence of U.S. Marines in his native land. Following the elections held in November 1928, President Coolidge might have withdrawn the Marines, but he chose to continue the counterinsurgency war against the “bandit” Sandino. The Marines scoured the rugged countryside without success for another four years. Sandino, meanwhile, became a heroic figure to those struggling against imperialism around the world (see Section IV, case study).



President Hoover (center left) arriving in Honduras, Nov. 26, 1928, to meet with President-elect Vicente Mejía Colindres as part of a goodwill tour

Following the election of Herbert Hoover as president in November 1928, the president-elect undertook a seven-week good-will tour of nine countries in Latin America. Attempting to counter widespread criticism of U.S. interventionist policies, he used the phrase “good neighbor” to describe U.S. intentions in the region. Speaking in Argentina, he asserted, “No intervention policy predominates or will prevail in my country,” notwithstanding the fact that U.S. troops remained in Nicaragua and Haiti. Further exciting hope for a change in policy, Hoover indicated in his first State of the Union address on December 3, 1929, his intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Nicaragua, Haiti, and China, saying, “We do not wish to be represented abroad in such a manner.”^[48] U.S. troops nonetheless remained in Nicaragua for another 25 months, and in Haiti for much longer (see Section IV, case study).

The Franklin Roosevelt administration

President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45) sought to turn a new page in U.S.-Latin American relations with his Good Neighbor Policy. The policy nullified the old Roosevelt Corollary and enshrined the principle of non-interventionism. In practical terms, the Roosevelt administration negotiated new agreements with Cuba, Haiti, and Panama that reduced but did not end U.S. control.

One reason for the change in policy was that Roosevelt wanted Latin American states to ally with the U.S. should another world war break out, as war clouds were already looming over Asia and Europe. Another reason was that Washington could hardly condemn aggression elsewhere in the world as long as it practiced strong-arm tactics in Latin America. Indeed, Japan had adopted the American hegemonic model, proclaiming a “Monroe Doctrine of the Orient” in order to justify its colonization of Korea, takeover of Manchuria, and creation of an exclusive sphere of influence in East Asia. In the words of Japanese delegates at a League of Nations conference on February 21, 1933, “Japan is responsible for the maintenance of peace and order in the Far East.”^[49]

This was the inverse of the golden rule. If the U.S. had the right to dominate Latin America, and if the British and French had the right to colonize Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, how could Japan be denied the “right” to a sphere of influence in East Asia? Indeed, how could Nazi Germany be denied its pursuit of *lebensraum* (living space) in Eastern Europe and beyond? Empire-building, whether formal or informal, was hardly the mechanism for establishing a stable world order.

IV. Case studies

This section examines in more detail six U.S. interventions during the first one-third of the 20th century – in Cuba, Panama, Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. Each was unique, with different measures of geopolitical-military, economic, and political motives, different levels of resistance, and different outcomes.

Cuba under the Platt Amendment

Following the defeat of Spain in the War of 1898, the U.S. militarily occupied Cuba for more than three years, preventing Cuban insurgents from achieving the independence for which they had fought. The Teller Amendment, which had been attached to the U.S. declaration of war, promised to leave Cuba in the hands of Cubans after “pacification” was complete; but the McKinley administration turned this mandate on its head and asserted the right to militarily occupy the island until a political order acceptable to the U.S. was established. In 1901, Washington insisted that the Cuban legislature adopt the Platt Amendment into its Constitution. Named after Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut, the amendment gave the U.S. permission to militarily intervene in Cuba at will, control Cuba’s national debt and treaty-making, and establish U.S. naval bases and coaling stations on the island.

The Cubans were not deceived. They recognized the disappearance of their long-sought independence and demonstrated in the streets against the adoption of the Platt Amendment. U.S. military governor General Leonard Wood denigrated the protesters as “trouble makers” and “the element absolutely without any conception of its responsibilities or duties as citizens.” Wood, the foreigner, thus presumed to define the meaning of Cuban citizenship. The new Cuban legislature initially refused to accept the Platt Amendment, but Washington made it clear that the military occupation would continue until the amendment

was approved. Faced with this ultimatum, the legislature adopted the amendment by a bare majority in June 1901, then formally appended it to the Cuban Constitution in December. General Wood privately acknowledged, “there is ... little or no independence left in Cuba under the Platt Amendment.”^[50] Having succeeded in relegating Cuba to the neocolonial status of a “protectorate,” U.S. military forces departed in May 1902.

Second intervention

The second intervention followed from the Platt Amendment but was quite different in nature. Rather than impose its unwanted demands upon the Cuban people, the U.S. acted as the paternal caretaker and set out to resolve a political breakdown and rebellion within the country, applying coercion but avoiding violence. The political breakdown originated with fraudulent elections in December 1905 and a massive purge of Liberal governors, mayors, and administrators by the government of President Tomás Estrada Palma. A Liberal rebellion ensued, beginning in August 1906 with an attack against a Rural Guard post in Pinar del Rio, at the southwestern tip of Cuba. Sugar interests were threatened, prompting U.S. *chargé d'affaires* Jacob Sleeper to cable Washington on September 4, “It is persistently reported that unless some peace arrangement is made before the 15th of this month, the rebels will begin burning foreign property.”^[51] Estrada Palma appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt for assistance in putting down the rebellion. Roosevelt was not eager to intervene militarily. He expressed his frustration with the whole affair in an internal memorandum dated September 13, 1906:

At this moment, I am so angry with that infernal little Cuban republic that I would like to wipe it off the face of the earth. All we have wanted from them was that they would behave themselves and be prosperous and happy so that we would not have to interfere. And now, lo and behold, they have started an utterly unjustifiable and pointless revolution and may get things into such a snarl that we have no alternative [but] to intervene.

The following day, Roosevelt reiterated, “We must act in such a way as to protect American interests by fulfilling American obligations to Cuba.”^[52] He ordered two battalions of Marines at Philadelphia and Norfolk to prepare “for expeditionary service in tropical waters.”^[53] At the same time he sent a peace commission to Havana, led by Secretary of War William H. Taft and Assistant Secretary of State Robert Bacon, to mediate a political settlement. Once there, Taft and Bacon became aware of the extent of Estrada Palma’s abuses. “The Government seems to have abused its powers outrageously in the elections and this [rebellion] is a protest against that,” wrote Taft.^[54] Taft and Bacon produced a compromise plan, but Estrada Palma would have none of it. He resigned instead; and the Cuban Congress, dominated by his Moderate Party refused to convene, thus leaving the administration of the Cuban government to the U.S. in accordance with the Platt Amendment.

U.S. troops arrived in Cuba in October 6, 1906. The presence of more than 5,000 U.S. soldiers, named the Army of Cuban Pacification, had the desired effect of persuading an estimated 25,000 rebels to cease their fight to overthrow the government. On October 10, Taft, as provisional governor, proclaimed a general amnesty “covering the offenses of rebellion, sedition, or conspiracy.” The rebels were even allowed to keep their stolen

horses. The greatest danger to U.S. soldiers in Cuba was disease. One out of ten was treated for venereal disease, indicating perhaps a thriving prostitution business.^[55]

The second occupation was run by Charles Magoon, a lawyer, judge, and diplomat from Nebraska who had previously served as governor of the Panama Canal Zone. He was brought in on October 12 to replace Taft. Lawyer that he was, he set about revising Cuba's legal code even as he ruled by decree. Under him were 56 U.S. Army officers who served in various capacities. Magoon petitioned President Roosevelt to create a permanent U.S. mission in Cuba, with positions to be held by U.S. military officers and administrators, but Roosevelt rejected the idea.

During his time as provisional governor, Magoon strengthened the Rural Guard and Cuban army so as to prevent further insurgencies, initiated road building and sanitation projects, and organized national elections set for November 1908. The U.S. Army, according to Army historian Bruce A. Vitor, "was careful not to provoke violence from potential insurgents, avoiding confrontations and potentially controversial social reform."^[56] Following the election, the U.S. handed the reins of government back to a newly elected legislature and President José Miguel Gómez in late January 1909. By April 1, all U.S. forces were withdrawn.

The success of the second U.S. occupation in restoring political order was not matched on the economic front. The period coincided with an economic depression that produced much hardship. According to Louis Pérez:

The cost of living in Cuba was high and rising, and Cubans everywhere were experiencing a decline in their material well-being. Work was still hard to come by. By 1907 more than 525,000 persons were without any work whatsoever. Included among the half million unemployed were some 35,000 veterans, most of whom passed the early years of the republic in conditions between deprivation and destitution.^[57]

The U.S. occupation did not cause the depression, of course, but it did reinforce an economic status quo that favored foreign interests over all classes of Cubans. In the decade following the War of 1898, a medley of U.S. corporations and land speculators acquired title to hundreds of thousands of acres of land; North Americans invested in mines, transportation, utilities, and cattle ranching; and the American Sugar Company and the Tobacco Trust became dominant in the export business, aided by U.S. tariff reductions established in the Reciprocity Treaty of 1903. The value of American investments in Cuba grew from \$50 million in 1896 to \$220 million in 1913.^[58]

Third intervention

Times were particularly hard for Afro-Cubans. They had played a major role in the Liberation Army and were promised political positions and social equality, but neither was realized. "Now more than a decade after the victory they were still second-class citizens," writes the historian Ivan Musicant. Moreover, in the Oriente Province where Afro-Cubans were concentrated, the economic situation had worsened. According to Musicant:

Oriente Province was overrun with speculators. Smallholdings were gobbled up in

complicated land tenure suits. Huge parcels were bought by the railroads. Sugar plantations and mining interests rapidly expanded, and the farmers and peasants quickly lost control of the land. Every piece converted to cash crop sugar meant less for subsistence agriculture. In the fields, factories, and mines, foreign workers displaced the locals. The world of the black Cubans was collapsing around them.^[59]

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Featured image: U.S. Marines arrived in Haiti in July 1915 and remained for nineteen years. (Source: Transcend Media Service)

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