

Race and U.S. Relations with Latin America: An Interpretation

How race has affected the relationship between the U.S. and the countries of Latin America.

For more than 200 years, racial prejudice has poisoned relations between the United States and [Latin America](#). For years, the prejudices of the United States led to attempts to dominate the region through military force and economic coercion. United States foreign policy in the region has been shaped by perceptions of Latin Americans as children who are unable to govern themselves properly. U.S.-backed paternalistic policies such as the Monroe Doctrine can be attributed to these flawed racial perceptions. This long history of racism and heavy-handed United States foreign policy has generated widespread animosity toward the United States throughout much of Latin America. From the onset of Latin American independence in the early nineteenth century to the present U.S. antidrug policies, little has changed in the unbalanced relations between the United States and Latin America.

Haiti and Latin America's Push for Independence

On January 1, 1804, the former slave colony of Santo Domingue proclaimed its independence from [France](#), ending a bloody revolution that began in 1791. The Republic of [Haiti](#) became the first free black state, resulting from the first successful slave revolt in Latin America. In addition to undermining slavery as an institution, the [Haitian Revolution](#) demonstrated that the colonial powers were vulnerable. The Haitian revolution raised fears among plantation owners of the Caribbean basin and Southern United States that relied on slave labor. Plantation owners attempted to keep the rebellion a secret, fearing that their own slaves would follow Haiti's example.

It was from Haiti, in 1816, that Venezuelan general Simon [Bolívar](#) set sail to liberate all areas of Latin America under colonial Spanish rule. With the military and economic support of Haitian president Alexandre [Pétion](#), Bolivar returned to [Venezuela](#), where he began his march to free the Americas. By 1822 Venezuela, [Colombia](#), [Ecuador](#), [Peru](#), and [Bolivia](#) had won their independence. In contrast to these new countries, [Puerto Rico](#) and [Cuba](#) retained their colonial status and did not seek independence. Fearing that a Haitian-style slave revolt would disrupt their economies, they remained loyal to [Spain](#).

Pan-American Conference

United States relations with Latin America had been almost nonexistent during Latin America's struggle for independence. The United States took a position of neutrality during Latin America's many anticolonial wars against Spain. Bolívar unsuccessfully sought aid from the United States to fight against Spain. The United States was uncertain who would win the war and maintained diplomatic relations with both Bolívar and Spain. Unhappy with the U.S. stance, Bolívar scornfully referred to the U.S. position as one of "arithmetic neutrality."

The already tenuous relationship between the United States and Latin America was further damaged in 1823 by the issuing of the Monroe Doctrine. During an annual address to congress, U.S. president James Monroe outlined the doctrine that barred European powers from interfering with the newly independent Spanish American countries. The Monroe Doctrine was a bold, unilateral statement of United States claims to Latin America. While the United States had little real hope of enforcing it against the superior military strength of European powers, the doctrine marked the start of a more aggressive U.S. presence in Latin America.

In 1826, pressed with economic and political problems, Bolívar planned a Pan-American Conference to provide a forum for the newly independent Latin American countries to resolve common problems. The United States

Senate narrowly approved participation in the Pan-American Congress and hoped to discuss the future of Haiti and Cuba within a growing U.S. sphere of influence. But the United States did not take the congress seriously, and racial prejudices prevented any real dialogue between the United States and Latin America.

The United States wanted to prevent recognition of Haiti as an independent country. Some senators declined to discuss the issue because they believed that doing so would be “giving Haiti equal rank with communities of men composed of the descendants of the Saxons, the Franks, and ancient Germans.” The case of Cuba presented another dilemma. Previous attempts by the United States to purchase Cuba had failed, and the United States wanted Cuba to remain under Spanish rule until it could be incorporated into the United States. The United States feared that Cuba would follow Haiti's example of slave revolt.

Manifest Destiny and Expansion into Mexico

Many white citizens of North America believed their continent had been given to them by God. Accordingly, territorial expansion of the United States became inevitable, and it was viewed by many whites as part of God's master plan. In conquering the continent, they were following manifest destiny, the idea that a Christian God had granted white Americans a right to control North America. In 1803 the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, increasing the area of the United States by approximately 2,100,000 square kilometers (811,000 square miles) of land west of the Mississippi River. Land-hungry white settlers and trappers moved across the Mississippi River into the cotton fields and cattle lands of Louisiana and East Texas. In 1819 Spain ceded Florida to the United States, and in 1821 the United States looked to the northern reaches of [Mexico](#), recently independent from colonial Spain. Northern Mexico stretched west from what is now Texas to the state of California and north to the Oregon border.

In 1822 the first white settlements were legally established in Texas. Over the next few years there was an influx of immigrants from the southern United States into the Mexican states of Texas and Coahuila. The Southerners continued to rely on slaves as the labor for their agricultural economy. Northern Mexico still belonged to the Mexican Republic, and the sudden influx of United States residents posed a threat to Mexican sovereignty. Fearful of losing its land, Mexico passed a series of laws to discourage further immigration from the United States. In 1829 the Mexican government abolished slavery, and in 1830 it prohibited any further immigration from the United States. Tensions mounted between Mexico and the United States, and fighting erupted on April 21, 1836, in the city of San Jacinto (near present-day Houston). The Battle of San Jacinto ended with the capture of Mexican general Santa Anna, who was forced to recognize Texas's independence and to withdraw his troops to south of the Río Grande. The United States victory ensured that Texas would secede from Mexico.

In 1845 relations between the United States and Mexico grew increasingly worse. A border dispute between the two countries became a catalyst for the [Mexican War](#). The war lasted from 1846 to 1848, and after many bloody battles it resulted in a decisive U.S. victory that forced Mexico to relinquish claims to its national territory. In 1848 the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which entitled the United States to the northern half of the Mexican territory.

Some Americans wanted to claim all the land in the vast Mexican Republic. Exactly how much of Mexico the United States would annex presented a dilemma. If the United States annexed the entire Mexican Republic, all Mexican citizens would become U.S. citizens. The words of Florida senator Edward Cabell typified the view of many officials and citizens. He said that the United States should not convert the “black, white, red, mongrel, miserable population of Mexico—the Mexicans, Indians, Mulattoes, Mestizas [sic], Chinos, Zambos, Quinteros—into free and enlightened American citizens, entitled to all the privileges we enjoy.”

Spanish-American War and Expansionist Policies

The United States entered a period of industrial growth during the final decades of the nineteenth century. To compete economically with [Europe](#), the country needed trade outlets for its growing industrial and agricultural production. Overseas expansion provided North America with a source for more raw materials, cheap labor, and captive consumers. The United States justified its increasingly aggressive expansionistic behavior in Latin America as complying with its duty to bring civilization to a supposedly latent Latin American culture.

The United States revealed its imperialistic goals when it fought Spain in a war over the Spanish colonies of Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. The Spanish-American War lasted almost four months, from April 25 to August 12, 1898. Fighting occurred primarily in or near the Spanish colonies of Cuba and the Philippines. The war provided the United States with an opportunity to acquire an overseas empire and to minimize European influence in Latin America. Spain's defeat guaranteed the independence of Cuba and the transfer of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam into protectorates of the United States. Puerto Rico was given semicolonial status, while Cuba was granted symbolic independence under close U.S. supervision. Spain's defeat marked the end of the Spanish colonial empire and the rise of the United States as a global power.

In 1901 the United States attached the Platt Amendment to Cuba's new constitution. The amendment justified U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs when the United States deemed such intervention necessary, and it gave the United States the right to build military bases on Cuban soil. The United States also imposed a restrictive democracy on Cuba, denying a large portion of the Cuban population the vote. This became a landmark decision, one that Secretary of State Elihu Root was confident historians would not forget. In 1908 Root declared, “the establishment of popular self-government, based on a limited suffrage, excluding so great a proportion of the elements which have brought ruin to Haiti and San Domingo, will be regarded as an event of first importance.”

Big-Stick Policy

Following the Spanish-American War, the United States emerged as the indisputable power in Latin America. An era of Spanish colonialism was replaced by U.S.-backed policies such as the Platt Amendment and the lingering threat of the so-called big stick. “Speak softly and carry a big stick” was the political approach advocated by President Theodore Roosevelt, by which he implied that formal [Colonial Rule](#) was not necessary for effective control. The big stick of the Roosevelt administration was the threat of war. Although force was rarely used against powerful nations in Europe or Asia, it was used to pressure Latin American countries to comply with the goals of the United States.

United States Intervention in Colombia

In early 1903, the senate of Colombia rejected the Hay-Herrán Treaty. The treaty would have entitled the United States to lease a strip of territory across the Isthmus of Panama to build a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Infuriated by Colombia's lack of cooperation, Roosevelt supported secessionist plans proposed by lobbyists from the Panama Canal Company and the Panamanian elite. On November 3, 1903, the secessionists declared the Isthmus of Panama independent from Colombia. The independence of [Panama](#) made the construction of the canal possible. The United States immediately recognized the new republic, and the Panamanians signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. The new treaty gave the United States the right to build and operate the Panama Canal, to control a special Canal Zone as if it were U.S. territory, and to annex more land for canal operations and defense. This episode demonstrated that the United States was willing to undermine and subvert democracy in Latin America when sufficient geopolitical interests were at stake.

Roosevelt Corollary

In 1902 Venezuela defaulted on its loan repayments to its European creditors, and the United States acknowledged the rights of [Germany](#) and [Great Britain](#) to impose a naval blockade to collect repayment. Roosevelt said that if a Latin American country misbehaved in its dealings with Europe, the United States would “let the European country spank it.” Roosevelt soon realized the error of this policy. To keep European influence out of Latin America, the United States needed the ability to intervene in Latin American affairs whenever national interest was at stake. In 1904 President Roosevelt signed the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. While the Monroe Doctrine was ostensibly designed to shield Latin America from European influence, the Roosevelt Corollary gave the United States the right to intervene in Latin America when U.S. interests were threatened. Most Latin Americans viewed Roosevelt's policy as a form of racist imperialism. The policy revealed that Roosevelt, like Monroe, was willing to dictate policies affecting the internal affairs of Latin American countries.

United States Intervention in the Dominican Republic and Haiti

In 1907 Roosevelt applied his corollary to the [Dominican Republic](#). Like Venezuela, the Dominican Republic had an enormous debt, and payment to its European creditors seemed impossible. Roosevelt feared that a European power would physically occupy the Dominican Republic to force repayment. The United States deemed it necessary to directly intervene and occupy the Dominican Republic. The U.S. military operated the Dominican custom receivership service for two years, using money collected to repay the nation's debts. The measure initially aimed at helping the Dominican Republic pay its foreign creditors later expanded into other sectors of Dominican life. From 1916 to 1924 the country was placed under the political administration of the U.S. Marine Corps. Financial supervision continued until 1941.

In 1915 Haiti suffered a similar fate when U.S. admiral William Banks Caperton placed it under the administrative control of the United States and abolished all forms of local government. The United States feared that French and German influences in Haiti posed a threat to security of the Panama Canal. U.S. Marines secured the Haitian countryside and built the institutions needed to govern a modern nation. The United States collected tariffs, paid foreign debts, restructured the government and military, and constructed new roads. The U.S. military occupation of Haiti ended on August 15, 1934. Reforms imposed by the United States did not last, and Haiti fell prey to dictators and disorganization for the next several decades. Although Haiti was left with a much better economic and financial infrastructure, the U.S. occupation failed in one of its primary objectives—establishing a stable democracy. Rather than admit its own failure to build institutions rooted in Haitian society, the United States explained this failure by citing the supposed inferiority of the Haitian people.

Almost fifty years of U.S. intervention in Latin America failed to bring either democracy or a dramatic improvement in the quality of life. In 1908 Cuba's former governor, Charles Magoon, predicted Latin America's inability to move forward. According to Magoon, the region was inhabited by a race that was “hot blooded, high strung, nervous, excitable and pessimistic,” as well as “suspicious of everyone.” He added that these characteristics would remain despite U.S. occupation “for two or twenty years,” emphasizing that Latin Americans would never “be changed by a military occupation.”

Cold War (1945–1989)

By the end of World War II in 1945, little had changed in relations between the United States and Latin America. Latin America was regarded as unable to govern itself correctly and as therefore dependent on the United States for political and cultural guidance. The aggressive and paternalistic U.S. policies aimed at preventing Latin America from being swayed to communism reflected this attitude. The United States believed intervention was necessary because of a lack of maturity of the Latin American countries. Secretary of State Allan Dulles warned the U.S. National Security Council that “unlike ourselves, many of the Latin American states are leaping ahead to irresponsible self-government directly out of a semi-colonial status. This presents the

communist with an ideal situation to exploit.” In short, Dulles argued, Latin America needed U.S. guidance to confront communism.

Guatemala and the United Fruit Company

The 1951 election of leftist Jacobo Arbenz to the presidency of [Guatemala](#) marked a shift in the Latin American political landscape. Arbenz considered Guatemala too dependent on external forces, especially the United States, and launched a badly needed agrarian reform program. Land was reclaimed from foreign investors and the Creole elite, then redistributed widely among the people of Guatemala. The hardest hit by this policy was the United Fruit Company, a U.S. company that owned large tracts of Guatemalan land. The United Fruit Company also controlled the majority of the country's ports, railroads, roads, and other infrastructure. Threatened by Arbenz's actions, the company accused his administration of being a beachhead for communism. Following intense lobbying by the United Fruit Company, the U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency also read Arbenz's policies as communist. The United States feared that if one Latin American country became communist, the rest of the region would fall to communism as well. With covert support from the United States, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas ousted President Arbenz and installed an anticommunist government that supported U.S. interests.

Fidel Castro and Cuba's Defiance of the United States

On January 1, 1959, Fidel [Castro](#) overthrew the Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio [Batista](#) and ushered in a new era of United States–Cuban relations. Despite U.S. attempts to keep communism out of Latin America, Castro installed a communist government in Cuba. By establishing a communist regime approximately a hundred miles from the United States, Castro created a major irritant to U.S. control of the area. Castro's radical, defiant policies did not sit well with President John F. Kennedy and his administration. Shortly after taking power, for example, Castro implemented a nationalization policy that directly affected many foreign-owned industries. The U.S.-run sugar industry was nationalized and placed under Cuban control. In response to such actions, the United States broke diplomatic ties with Cuba in 1961.

The United States perceived the emergence of communism in Cuba as evidence of a lack of maturity in the Cuban mentality. To combat the growing threat of communism, Kennedy planned a covert invasion of Cuba in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs. This attempt by the United States to overthrow Castro failed, giving the dictator renewed confidence that pushed him further into the Soviet sphere of influence. The Kennedy administration responded to the communist threat with a threefold strategy. First, the United States trained Latin American military personnel to fight communism in military schools backed by the United States. Second, convinced that social inequality and poverty were the causes of communism, the Kennedy administration launched the Alliance for Progress, a program for technical and financial development among nations friendly to the United States. Finally, the United States ordered an economic blockade of Cuba aimed at destroying the island's [Sugar](#) economy. Kennedy's policies failed to remove Castro, however, and Castro remained a thorn in the side of the United States in following decades.

Carter Administration

With the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1977, the United States reevaluated its foreign policy toward Latin America. The Carter administration sought to promote improved relations and to dismantle old prejudices held both in the United States and in Latin America. Carter denied aid to Latin American dictators based on their human rights violations. He treated Latin Americans with respect, which helped mend the wounds left by previous administrations. In 1977 Carter reached an agreement with Panamanian president Omar Torrijos for the return of the Panama Canal to Panama. After left-wing Sandinistas overthrew Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio

Somoza Debayle, Carter engaged the new government in dialogue instead of fighting it. From 1979 until the end of his term in 1981, Carter provided the Sandinista government with financial assistance.

Reagan Years

President Ronald Reagan's election to office in 1981 marked a return to earlier paternalistic policies based on prejudices against Latin America. The Reagan administration believed the United States to be culturally and politically superior to Latin America. Because of this belief, the administration saw it as the duty of the United States to guide Latin America away from the communist threat and safely into democracy. Reagan perceived former president Carter's Latin American policies as weak. Reagan continued to fight what he regarded as the continued advancement of communism in [Central America](#), and he denied any further aid to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. He focused on arming and training counterinsurgency groups to halt the spread of Communism in Latin America. By covertly supporting the Salvadoran army and the Nicaraguan Contra insurgents, Reagan perpetuated bloody and prolonged civil wars in Central America. Determined to gain peace for Central America through personal diplomacy, Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez called upon [El Salvador](#), Guatemala, [Honduras](#), and [Nicaragua](#) to renew the peace process. Civil wars in the region and the tensions between Nicaragua's Sandinista government and the United States stalled all peace talks. In August 1987 the presidents of all five Central American nations signed a peace agreement temporarily halting the bloodshed. President Regan opposed the peace plan and continued to provide military support to right-wing dictatorships.

Post–Cold War Relations and the War on Drugs

The end of the Cold War in 1989 once again changed the dynamics of the relations between the United States and Latin America. Communism no longer seemed to threaten Latin America, since it had for the most part crumbled along with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany. The United States needed a new adversary. The War on Drugs, a policy that portrayed drugs as another destabilizing menace that originated in Latin America, shifted the focus of U.S. foreign policy in the region. According to the United States, the War on Drugs had to be fought in the countries that produced and supplied the drugs. The U.S. militarily intervened in countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Mexico, which were pinpointed as the sources of drug production. Latin American leaders demanded that the problem be treated at an international level, not unilaterally, but they were ignored by the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Under both presidents, the United States conditioned economic aid on compliance with its antidrug policies.

The U.S. War on Drugs in Latin America continued during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Critics reviled the ongoing campaign as a continuation of oppressive American imperialism. In the 2000s, the U.S. pressured [Bolivia](#) to reduce its coca (the raw material for cocaine) output. Cultivating coca leaves is a centuries old pursuit that has great cultural significance among Bolivia's Indians. American policy created unrest in Bolivia that helped lead to the overthrow of the country's pro-U.S. president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Defiance of Washington has spread to other Latin American nations during the Bush administration. In 2003, for example, Mexico and Chile did not support the U.S. efforts to gain United Nations approval for a military action against Iraq.