

Racism and Early U.S. Foreign Policy

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Since the times of George Washington, the United States has instrumented a peculiar, indulgent notion of charity to indigenous peoples: “We are more enlightened and more powerful than the Indian nations; we are therefore bound in honour to treat them with kindness, and even with generosity.”²

Racism became more than a banner in the United States. When combined with the certainty of being “chosen” among nations, it was a major component of the country’s early “national greatness.” To achieve this kind of “greatness,” there was only one domestic obstacle to overcome: the American Indians. While their aim was economic (their desire to take over Indian lands), the Americans resorted to social and political devices to achieve it. These devices were probably behind the construction of the racist rationale.

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¹ This is a fraction of a major research project in process at the CISAN.

² George Washington quoted in Alexis De Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 350. My emphasis.

Moreover, this “encounter with alien peoples” was to be the first of many during America’s pursuit of greatness across the hemisphere and overseas.

U.S. “White power” understood the world and humanity in terms of skin color, assigning characteristics to each color. In this view, Indians were publically condemned as backward, wild and, in the words of Benjamin Franklin, “barbarous tribes of savages that delight in war and take pride in murder.” Franklin, it must be noted, had a racist conception of life. Like Jefferson, according to the convention of the time, Franklin was a slave owner. He considered Anglo-Saxons “the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth”; he said he wished “their numbers were increased,” since he was “perhaps partial to the Complexion of My Country, for such Kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.”³

This notion of race as a concept and as a point of departure

³ Benjamin Franklin, quoted by Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, Yale, 1987, p. 46. See also p. 26.

for determining virtue developed a hierarchical attitude about reality of which Benjamin Franklin was only one outstanding representative. The cultural effect of this on subsequent generations would be important in distinguishing among the “various peoples of the world on the bases of physical features, above all skin colour and to a lesser extent, head type.”

Americans were setting themselves up as the elite among the races, as “superior,” just as the U.S. was to set itself up as a nation **unique** among nations, destined to control the world’s affairs. And this was to be absorbed by Americans as an “awareness of race in their schooling, in their homes and in their work place. As a central point of cultural reference on which all were agreed, race could be applied to foreign problems without fear that the concept itself would arouse domestic controversy.”⁴

Hence the racial and hierarchical emphasis in interpreting world politics was to be an important component in the U.S. definition

⁴ Hunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 48 and 52.

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of the new order in the post-colonial era. Thus the answer to the question, "Who is going to be in charge?" had interesting repercussions in the southern part of the Americas. Every country needs to consolidate its own identity, its cultural and political language. But this was even more important when that country was about to become a world power, as was the case of the United States, which established both its preeminence and to some extent its identity at the expense of other nations and regions of the world. A major precondition for U.S. strength was its complete control over the affairs that most concerned it.

American expansionism reached its zenith in 1845 when the term "Manifest Destiny" was coined by a journalist⁵ in Washington and thereafter implemented by Democratic President James J. Polk, although the ideas that supported this policy already existed. It was not fortuitous therefore that American policymakers tended to use the name of the continent ("Ame-

rica") as their own, providing us with a clue to the U.S. ideology of expansionism that was to become a major geopolitical project. If the Americans considered it their right to appropriate the term, it was not for semantic reasons. Perhaps they thought it their right because theirs was the first successful independent process in the region.⁶

It is extremely important to distinguish between the United States and America to come to terms with the vital geopolitical distinction there is between "one" and the "other" America: "The United States is a political entity, but 'America' is a place. 'America' lacks a government to articulate its foreign policies, a military to sustain them and precise territorial jurisdiction... The United States is *in* the Americas, but America is *of* the Americas. The deceptively narrow but important distinction between those phrases, evaluated historically, is... critical for understanding United States policy toward Latin America and helps to explain why (as some Amer-

icans believe) it is often artfully conceived and enthusiastically supported yet ultimately fails to achieve its purpose. The United States and America have come to mean qualitatively different things to Latin Americans during the past century and a half, as the legacy of the interaction between them has bequeathed two hemispheres... An American (which I define as a citizen of the United States) is one who believes that the promise of America can be fulfilled in the United States."⁷

I would suggest that the core of the matter lies in the very idea that it was vital that the United States (i.e. "America") be linked to the rest of the region (i.e. "our little region over there which has never bothered anybody," as Secretary of War Henry Stimson said in 1944). Some of the nationalism and even anti-American outbreaks in the region later should be seen in this light: from being one more among the actors in the Americas, the U.S. transformed itself into being the "American" dominant actor, the "American Nation" above and beyond the rest. In other words, there was only one way to be "America" in the Americas, and this was by stepping over other countries' national interests and putting the U.S. first. Historically, then, "America" has had the last

⁵ See F. Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963, Chapter 2.

⁶ On the origins and rationale of the term "America," see Christopher Coker, *Reflections on American Foreign Policy Since 1945*, Pinter in association with John Spiers, London, 1989.

⁷ See L. D. Langley, *America and the Americas: The United States in the Western Hemisphere*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 1989, pp. xvi-xviii.

word in settling regional conflicts and has used indiscriminate interventionist and punitive policies both regionally and domestically (to indiscriminately contain Mexican immigration, for instance).

This contemptuous and superior attitude is openly supported by many in the United States: "It is widely assumed in the United States that the nations of Latin America are an inferior species of states that belong rightfully in the sphere of influence of the United States, existing primarily for the purpose of implementing its foreign policy, contributing to its defense and servicing its economy."⁸ Distinguished politicians like W.H. Taft, for example, considered the Latin Americans "...naughty children who are exercising all the privileges and rights of grown-ups."⁹

Not in vain have Latin Americans historically resented U.S. citizens' appropriation of the adjective "American." It shows the proprietorial attitude toward the hemisphere which already existed before 1823 when the Monroe Doctrine was launched. It was this same attitude that had originally fueled the missionary zeal for the U.S.'s recolonization impulse and westward expansionism.

⁸ See Robert N. Burr, *Our Troubled Hemisphere. Perspectives on United States-Latin American Relations*, The Brookings Institute, Washington, D.C., 1967, p. 48.

⁹ Quoted in N. Chomsky, *Turning the Tide. U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace*, Pluto Press, Boston, 1985, p. 59.

It may be argued, then, that the U.S. used a normative policy and contempt for peoples and countries, together with an early "containment" strategy, to establish the basis for controlling an entire independent continent (Cuba being the only exception).¹⁰ Thus, it is easy to understand why Latin American integrity was seen as "an incident and not an end."¹¹ Similarly, President John Adams (1797-1801) said contemptuously that the Latin Americans would need to be pro-

¹⁰ With the exception of Cuba, which was still under Spanish rule.

¹¹ *Ibid.* This assertion was made in reference to the case of Mexico.

tected when undertaking independent nationhood, since establishing democracies among Spanish American peoples would be like "...establishing democracies among the birds, beasts and fishes."¹²

The well-known, colorful filibusterer William Walker, who invaded Nicaragua several times and ruled it once, said, "They are but drivellers who speak of establishing fixed relations between the pure white American race, as it exists in the United States, and the mixed Hispano-Indian race, as it exists

¹² Quoted in A. Whitaker, *The U.S. and the Independence of Latin America*, Baltimore Press, Baltimore, 1940, p. 37.



The Monroe Doctrine, 1912 (reprinted with the permission of the *St. Paul's Dispatch*).

in Mexico and Central America, without the employment of force. The history of the world presents no such Utopian vision as that of an inferior race yielding meekly and peacefully to the controlling influence of a superior people.”¹³

All these aspects of U.S. policy in the region were major components of the Monroe Doctrine. The region was conceived of as the “natural area” that would allow the U.S. to consolidate its expansion, and the newly independent former Spanish colonies gave the U.S. an excellent opportunity to do so.

To extend its control to the southern part of the continent, it first had to extend its national boundaries westward, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Florida Purchase in 1819. While the Monroe Doctrine was ostensibly to “protect” the continental integrity from the expansionism of the Holy Alliance (Austria, Naples, Prussia, Russia and Sardinia), it would be skillfully used to control the west coast and part of Mexico’s territory to the south.

Just one of the myriad of explanations of this phenomenon is to be found in Hegel’s observation: “There [was] no neighboring state in America with which the U.S. could have the kind of relationship which prevails among the European nations, a state which they would have to view with distrust and against

which they would have to maintain a standing army. Canada and Mexico present no serious threat, and England has found over the last 50 years that a free America is more useful than a dependent one.” He was not wrong when he foresaw North America’s prominent future: “America is therefore the country of the future, and its world-historical importance has yet to be revealed in the ages which lie

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ahead —perhaps in a conflict between North and South America.”¹⁴

Perhaps the most important stage in the consolidation of U.S. strength in the region was the war with Mexico and the annexation of half its territory. The U.S. had already annexed the state of Texas, after the American settlers the Mexican government had allowed to live there rebelled against Mexican legislation prohibiting more American immigration. The U.S. supported the Texans’ demand for independence, and, in 1836, after the

defeat of the Mexican army, Texas became independent. Mexico not only protested but committed itself militarily to stop continual U.S. maneuvering to annex more Mexican territory. A decade later, after two years of war, Mexico lost to the United States. The U.S. victory could not have been more decisive: new borders were established and the Rio Grande finally became what Senator Benton considered a river intended for the United States, according to “the laws of God and nature.”¹⁵ In 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, U.S. territory was increased by one-fifth when it annexed more than half of Mexico, 850,000 square miles including the states of Texas, Nevada, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Utah and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. While the Polk administration was ready to pay U.S.\$30 million for the acquisition, only U.S.\$15 million was actually paid.

Although the Monroe Doctrine was originally a “hands-off” policy, it was mainly the United States’ best opportunity for practicing its favorite policy of overseeing Latin American developments. It was both imperialist and anti-imperialist. Monroe and his secretary of state, J.Q. Adams, wanted no external

¹³ See Albert Katz Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny. A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, John Hopkins, Baltimore, Maryland, 1958, p. 211.

¹⁴ This summarizes Hegel’s position in the debate on the New World.

¹⁵ Quoted in R. W. Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 102. On this aspect of history, see Merk, *op. cit.*; Weinberg, *op. cit.*; De Tocqueville, *op. cit.* and W. LaFeber, *The Panama Canal, The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978.

interference in the affairs of the new independent nations, least of all a restoration of Spanish control over its former colonies. This was not because of what Monroe called his "great consideration"¹⁶ for their independence, but because of their own need to expand and consolidate their role as protectors. In reality they were protecting their own interests: the preservation of an area set apart for "freedom" and "independence" as conceived by U.S. policy makers and the prevailing spirit in the American republic itself, and which would endure in the decades to come. According to Van Alstyne, "The Monroe Doctrine is really an official declaration fancying the 'western hemisphere' as a United States sphere of influence."¹⁷

¹⁶ See Thomas P. Brockway, *Basic Documents in United States Foreign Policy*, D. Van Nostrand, Princeton, 1968, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷ Van Alstyne, *op. cit.*, p. 99. See also the interesting and complete study by Whitaker, *op. cit.*, Chapters 15, 16 and 18.

This succession of events, combined later with the United States' political control of Cuba's 1899 independence process (plus the imposition of the Platt Amendment and the U.S. holding of Guantanamo), would be the first major signs of U.S. geopolitical aims, the beginning of the U.S.'s self-designated right to defend the region's integrity from "foreign intervention." This went beyond the defense of the new Latin American citizens' "liberty and happiness." It was a major demonstration of U.S. success in increasing both its territory and political power, at the same time that it helped consolidate two historical projects: a) the special role of missionary, whereby the United States proclaimed itself the sole protector of the American states, and b) the creation of a powerful device to justify and dissimulate expansionism, thereafter to be used against foreign attempts to participate in Latin American affairs. In this view, the banner of "the defense" of the

continent from foreign aggression would in the future turn into a paradigmatic, effective means of exerting full political influence over Latin American countries. In this context, it is possible to emphasize the U.S.'s imposition of norms and contempt as major components of its containment strategy.

However, is this imposition of norms a result of the unique national virtue proclaimed by the United States, the element that permitted it to implement its policies successfully? Or, as Colin S. Gray pointed out, "Did the United States succeed in nation-building and in forcible nation-restoration because it was virtuous, or because it had Canadians and Mexicans as its neighbors rather than Russians and Germans...?"¹⁸ W

¹⁸ See Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 1988, p. 39.



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