We Have Left Them Unexamined for Too Long

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In 1943, Vice President Henry Wallace made a triumphant goodwill tour of Latin America and received tumultuous acclaim from large audiences everywhere. In 1958, Vice President Richard Nixon made a comparable trip through Latin America and his reception ranged from indifference to indignity.

The marked contrast between the two journeys is a fact of major concern for Americans. The decisive difference does not lie in the respective personal merits of Mr. Wallace and Mr. Nixon, although these personal qualities have some importance. Nor is it that Latin America in the past fifteen years has entered a quickened state of revolutionary change, although that is also true. The fundamental difference is not that Latin America has changed in the past fifteen years but that the world role of the United States has changed.

The startling importance and inescapable burdens of a world super-power have overtaken us with swift, giant strides; since 1940—and almost without realizing it—America has lost the easy, friendly face of an overgrown big brother and donned the hard mask of power. Not so long ago the United States, for all its wealth, its bumptiousness, and its bossy attitudes toward the little countries of the Caribbean and Central America, did not loom much larger on the world stage than Brazil; at least it was possible for this country, pursuing a course of strict isolation, to maintain this agreeable political fiction in dealing with its continental neighbors. Today, the United States is one of the movers and shakers of the universe.

This change is often more apparent to outsiders than to Americans. This is particularly true of our Latin neighbors who have lived beside us and dealt politically and economically at close range with us for much longer than the rest of the world. Herein lies the problem. The Latin Americans have changed their expectations of us; we have not changed our attitudes toward them—or toward ourselves.

The economic conflicts within the Western hemisphere exemplify clearly this disjunction between their demand and our response. Several of our neighbor countries are predominantly cash crop, single commodity producers: Cuba (sugar), Brazil (coffee), Venezuela (oil), Bolivia (tin), and Peru and Chile (copper). Raw material prices are notoriously unstable and vulnerable to relatively small ups-and-downs in the economies of the mature industrial nations which purchase these materials. The current American recession badly hurts several of these neighbor countries, but there is nothing new in this development. It has happened many times in the past. What is new is the acute sense that the United States has a direct responsibility to do something about it, and the feeling of disappointment when our country does not.

This feeling of disappointment is aggravated by our government-sponsored program of voluntary restrictions on Venezuelan oil imports by our domestic refineries and by American agitation for quotas and higher tariffs on copper, lead, and zinc imports. Yet these aggravated injuries are more prospective than real. The voluntary program for restriction of oil imports, for example, does not work very effectively and the rumors of higher duties on copper are only rumors. One would be hard put to prove that the decline in raw material prices or the threat of American import restrictions provide an adequate economic explanation for the outbreak of the disorders against Vice President Nixon. The Latin Americans are just not that badly off or, rather, they are not that badly off to any unprecedented extent.

Our neighbor countries have developed in the post-war period a growing conviction that the United States is slighting them. United States diplomats can point to a substantial flow of Export-Import Bank loans and a not inconsiderable amount of Point Four technical assistance. This explanation does not satisfy because although our assistance is moderately large in absolute terms, it is small relative to the total amount of aid we dispense around the world and to the gaping need for capital of the underdeveloped parts of Latin America. The Eisenhower administration has had to cope directly with
this swelling volume of complaints because its coming to power coincided with the end of the artificial boom in raw material prices induced by the Korean War.

For five years, the Eisenhower administration has sent a series of special envoys on fact-finding missions, goodwill trips, and to formal hemispheric conferences, but always without tangible result. Dr. Milton Eisenhower on his various trips, Vice President Nixon on an earlier tour in Central America, ex-Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey, and lesser administration officials have all preached to the Latin countries a common sermon of fiscal conservatism and economic self-restraint. The Latins have been warned not to import more consumer goods and luxuries than they could pay for out of their own gross national product. They have been told not to schedule grandiose development schemes when modest improvements in farming methods and better back-country roads would more nearly correspond to their economic capacities and their immediate needs. They have been told not to try to shortcut the hard facts of life by inflating their currency. They have been repeatedly reminded that the United States was not going to underwrite the stabilization of world coffee prices or world metal prices.

This advice has some factual basis. Brazil has undoubtedly worsened its coffee difficulties by inept economic planning. The Peron regime squandered Argentina's foreign exchange. The Jimenez regime in Venezuela diverted much-needed oil revenues from health, education, and development of the hinterland to the building of expensive, showy public works in Caracas and to useless militarism. Several Latin countries have permitted ruinous price inflation. A few are vexed with endemic corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement. American cabinet members, diplomats, and bankers can point out these obstacles to Latin American presidents and finance ministers but what are the latter to tell the Latin American masses, the shirtless, landless ones?

Exhortation, admonition, and empty cheer do not win friends nor influence people, especially when the poor have been led to expect much more from their rich, powerful neighbor. The governments, intelligentsia, and middle classes of Latin America know, moreover, that the United States observes lower standards in dispensing aid in other parts of the world. Turkey, for example, has had a wilder inflation than any country in South America. The Turks even expelled the Dutch chief of a World Bank mission for giving them the same kind of dour advice that ex-Secretary Humphrey regularly tendered the Latin Americans. Similarly, Pakistan's economy is disorganized, South Korea insists upon carrying on a notoriously uneconomic feud with its neighbor Japan, and General Franco's government in Spain is no more competent at economic planning than the worst offender in this hemisphere. Yet these various delinquencies and aberrations do not preclude the United States from giving generous assistance to Turkey, South Korea, Pakistan, and Spain.

The obvious American retort is that these countries are strategically situated and their military strength is essential to our containment of Russia. The Latin Americans, however, can properly ask: is a country five-hundred miles from the United States less strategic than one four-thousand miles away? If the United States thought it necessary to take drastic measures to unseat a pro-Communist government in tiny Guatemala in order to remove a menace to the Panama Canal, how would it rate the danger from a Communist government in oil-rich Venezuela or huge Brazil?

If United States assistance is allotted on the basis of strategic importance and potential military usefulness, Latin America can make as strong a claim as any other region of the world. The United States could ignore the Latin American countries as long as this country was itself willing to be ignored by the rest of the world. Since our isolation in world affairs ended in 1939, we can ignore them no longer. A great power must have a care for the concerns of others for only in this way can it protect its own.

Britain's balance of payments, Japan's fishing rights, Tunisia's unemployment, and Egypt's cotton surplus have almost overnight become America's problems. They are our problems not because we caused them or are logically required by immediate self-interest to relieve them but because if we do not help relieve them, they will be solved in the long run in ways we may not like and which may be gravely injurious to our interests. So it is with Brazil's coffee surplus or Bolivia's tin miners. These material surpluses and shortages, these human exigencies, now are within the domain of our concern.

The United States since the war has been slow to recognize this widened responsibility insofar as Latin American countries were concerned. There was some excuse for the Truman administration, necessarily preoccupied, as it was, with the rebuilding of ravaged Europe and the unexpected crisis of the Korean War. The Eisenhower administration, however, has been curiously apathetic. This is not because of failure to perceive the problem. Mr. Dulles early singled it out and described it with telling accuracy.
On January 27, 1953, he said: “Sometimes we're inclined to take South America for granted. But the reality is that there are strong Communist movements in South America and fascist influences in some quarters which are working away, largely underground so far, and they're trying to destroy the traditional friendship between the people of the American republics. The past administration has been so preoccupied with some of these problems of Europe and Asia and Africa that I referred to that I fear it may have somewhat neglected Latin America and taken it for granted that we could forget about South America for a time and then go back again and find everything as it was before. But actually any such policy of neglect would lead to growing danger.”

The gap between words and deeds may be ascribed in part to a simple unwillingness to spend money, always an important consideration in a budget-conscious administration. Perhaps equally important has been the rigid adherence to economic orthodoxy. There has been an instinctive conviction within the highest government circles that it was inherently immoral to subsidize inefficient producers, to succor inflation-prone regimes, to interfere with the iron law of supply and demand in the commodity trade.

The stern economic advice our government has given the Latin Americans in recent years has had considerable merit, but it has made few connections with the truths of life in those countries. Their inhabitants would undoubtedly be in much better shape in the long run if they practiced the austerities of thrift, prudence, and wise self-restraint adopted since World War II by the Dutch and the West Germans. The ineluctable truth remains nevertheless that Venezuelans are not Dutch nor is the Argentines peopled with Germans. The classical economic doctrines preached by conservative bankers and theorists must be tempered to meet the unyielding facts of history, national character, class conflict, and popular expectations.

Foreign economic policy may yet be a life-and-death matter for the United States and elsewhere. The longheaded political considerations of the State Department must have priority over the conservative orthodoxies of the Treasury Department, the International Bank, and the Export-Import Bank. Hard as it is for many of our policymakers to surrender their strict Puritan principles, they must be given up. Economics is too important to be left to the economists and the businessmen.

The United States should markedly increase the flow of economic aid to Latin America. It should promote major development projects even though they may be accompanied by some avoidable inflation. Heroic measures should be undertaken to narrow the range of fluctuation in the prices of coffee and the basic metals, no matter how much this would breach the theory of free markets.

The President of the United States now and in the future must exert himself by every political expedient to outwit and outwork those who would put a false conception of the best interests of a single state or a single industry ahead of those of the entire country. Influential Texas Democrats have pushed relentlessly for restrictions on Venezuelan oil imports; a bipartisan bloc in Congress from the western mining states has lobbied for higher copper tariffs. Any responsible administration must not only resist these lobbies, as Mr. Eisenhower and his associates have on the whole tried to do, but must also organize a countertoffensive.

In this connection, Secretary of the Interior Seaton has recently proposed an arrangement whereby the federal government would make up the difference between the world price and fixed domestic price for copper, lead, and zinc. This would be an alternative to raising the domestic price artificially by cutting imports either by an import quota or a sharply higher tariff. It is much the more desirable alternative and represents the first genuinely courageous and statesmanlike initiative the Eisenhower administration has attempted in this complex field.

The issues of our Latin American policy reach well beyond the realm of economics. There is the equally important and equally exacting realm of political confidence and cultural cooperation. Good political relationships are not a matter of formal conferences and formal alliances. Anyone of us knows in ordinary private life when another person solicits our opinion as a routine courtesy and when we are being invited to join in a genuine consultation. The same is true in diplomacy. The other republics of the hemisphere are our staunchest allies in the United Nations. It is questionable whether we reciprocate their support by an active attention to their views.

Many of our ambassadors to Latin America, under every administration, cannot speak Spanish or Portuguese and have no visible qualifications for office. This is the kind of continuing waste and irresponsibility that is inexcusable and inexplicable.

Shortly after taking office in 1953, President Eisenhower was invited by a group of Latin American envoys to visit their countries. He declined and sent his brother Milton in his stead. (President Eisenhower has never ventured to travel in this region except for a one-day conference of presidents in
Panama in 1956.) Goodwill visits are at best dubious enterprises. They rarely produce good feeling unless that sentiment is already well-established in the host country. They can never serve as a substitute for positive economic and political acts. A chief of state commands an automatic deference denied all others; if it is impossible for a President of the United States to go in person, lesser figures should probably content themselves with attending strictly ceremonial functions such as inaugurations and conferences or else travel in their private capacity for their own intellectual enrichment.

Vice President Nixon attempted another and a bolder course. He tried to execute a mission in people-to-people diplomacy. Yet reflection should suggest that it is really impossible for a high-ranking foreign visitor to have authentic and unembarrassed personal meetings with students and other private citizens. Mr. Nixon, for example, cannot speak Spanish or Portuguese. He necessarily travels with a retinue of military aides, Secret Service detectives, interpreters, American and foreign diplomatic officials, and platoons of newspapermen and photographers. His arrival with his entourage in a classroom or a labor union hall cannot help but make for a distorted situation. No speeches or dialogues conducted through interpreters can have important educational value under these circumstances.

People-to-people diplomacy also may run counter to the diverse traditions of other peoples. Latin American students are not accustomed to the easy give-and-take of the American classroom: they do not treat their professors with democratic informality. What is appropriate in southern California or Nebraska may be out of place in Lima or Buenos Aires. Personal persuasiveness and aggressiveness are likely only to widen rather than to close cultural differences. It is perhaps wisest to leave these relationships to private, nongovernmental institutions. American labor unions, farm organizations, churches, cooperatives, and universities can form ties and keep alive lines of communication more effectively than highly placed official persons.

- There is also the vexing problem of dictatorships. It would be in harmony with our ideals if we dealt only with democratic governments, but this is manifestly impossible. Some have proposed a compromise formulation according to which the United States would observe the proprieties with a dictator but grant favors and friendship only to democrats, to one a handshake and to the other a cordial embrace.

This plan more nearly accords with the truth of our diplomatic situation, but even so it will not always prove possible to observe in practice. Dictators may be effusively and even embarrassingly friendly to the United States, as is General Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. Other dictators such as the late Getulio Vargas of Brazil may be not only friendly but also responsible and enlightened in the conduct of their nation's affairs. Former Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, a veteran of more than three decades of diplomatic service, most of it devoted to Latin American affairs, has pointed out that some dictators have materially advanced the welfare of their own people. Finally, many dictators, whether good or bad, stay in power for long stretches.

It would be presumptuous for this country to attempt to tell other peoples how to run their political affairs. All such attempts at intervention have been failures. Spruille Braden, while U. S. Ambassador to Argentina in 1945-46, openly exerted influence against Peron and failed.

The preoccupation with the problem of the dictators is a misplacement of interest. A positive policy of encouragement and economic assistance to democratic governments in Costa Rica, Bolivia, Uruguay, and elsewhere will much more effectively demonstrate our friendly concern for democracy's success. Good Neighbors are those who seize opportunities to help and to share. Those opportunities are not lacking today in Latin America.