

Imperialism in Latin America

The aftermath of independence in Latin America did not include the prosperity that its liberators had envisioned. Land ownership continued to be inequitable, and improper land usage was common. Political power often resided in the hands of revolutionary leaders who ruled as dictators. Lacking a tradition of political participation, most Latin Americans were accustomed to political power for the elite classes only.

Foreign Economic Influence

Upon achieving independence, the independent nations of Latin America began active trade with Great Britain and the United States. The invention of the refrigerated railroad car in 1882 facilitated the export of perishable products such as fruits, vegetables and beef. On the other hand, the growth of industry in Latin America remained very limited. After independence, Latin America imported American and European manufactures and paid little attention to developing its own industry, preventing itself from competing with other modern nations. Also, instead of investing in the improvement of their own infrastructure, the new republics preferred to borrow money at high interest rates from foreign nations in order to fund their export industries. When the Latin American nations could not repay their debts, foreign powers would exert force against their debtor nations, or sometimes occupy it, to collect payment.

1. What negative effect came from early relations between Latin America and foreign nations?

The Monroe Doctrine

After Latin American independence had been achieved, the United States feared that the weak new republics would be incapable of warding off imperial interests from European countries. Consequently, in 1823, U.S President James Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the Americas were not open to colonization but and European power. Great Britain reinforced the impact of the Monroe Doctrine by pledging to support it.

The power of the Monroe Doctrine was demonstrated in 1898 when the United States joined the Cubans in their struggle for independence from Spain. As a result of the six-week-long Spanish-American War, Cuba won its independence in 1901. The Spanish also relinquished the last of their colonies—Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines—to the United States.

1. What was the Monroe Doctrine?
2. What happened because of the Spanish-American War?

The Panama Canal

As the United States and other nations became increasingly involved in global trade, they began investigating the possibility of digging a canal across Central America. Traveling through a canal would be much quicker and cheaper than having to travel around the southern tip of South America in order to reach the opposite coast by sea. In the 1880s, the French had already been financially unsuccessful in their plans to cut a canal across Panama.

President Theodore Roosevelt favored the construction of a canal across Panama, which was a part of Colombia. When Colombia wanted to high a price for the purchase of the territory in Panama, the United States backed a revolution in Panama. When the Panamanians won their independence, they granted the United States a ten-mile-wide zone for the construction of the canal. Completed in 1914, the Panama Canal attracted ships from around the globe.

In 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter negotiated a treaty with Panama that eventually return ownership of the canal back to Panama. Carter responded to criticism of the treaty by saying that resentment of the Panamanians toward U.S colonialism had left the United States with no other option than to return the canal. Over the next twenty years, the United States would gradually relinquish ownership of the Canal Zone until it was returned in 1999.

1. What was the purpose of the Panama Canal?

2. How did the U.S get the land to create it?

Increased U.S Economic Interest in Latin America

The United States continued its presence in Cuba and its investments in the new Latin American republics. To protect its interests and to strengthen the Monroe Doctrine, in 1904 President Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary, which made the United States a “police power” in the Americas. In the years to come, the United States would frequently use the Roosevelt Corollary to justify their intervention and occupation in the nations of Latin America. The Latin American republics, however, would resent the intrusion of the colossal power to the north.

1. What was the Roosevelt Corollary?

2. How did it help the US?

THE MONROE DOCTRINE

...In the discussions to which this interest has given rise and in the arrangements by which they may terminate the occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers....

It was stated at the commencement of the last session that a great effort was then making in Spain and Portugal to improve the condition of the people of those countries, and that it appeared to be conducted with extraordinary moderation. It need scarcely be remarked that the result has been so far very different from what was then anticipated. Of events in that quarter of the globe, with which we have so much intercourse and from which we derive our origin, we have always been anxious and interested spectators. The citizens of the United States cherish sentiments the most friendly in favor of the liberty and happiness of their fellowmen on that side of the Atlantic.

In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere we are of necessity more immediately connected, and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened and impartial observers...

With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States...

If we look to the comparative strength and resources of Spain and those new Governments, and their distance from each other, it must be obvious that she can never subdue them. It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in the hope that other powers will pursue the same course....

Source: *J.D. Richardson, ed., Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 2 (1907), 287.*

1. What is the purpose of the Monroe Doctrine?
2. What evidence does he use to prove that Europe should not be involved with Latin America?