

A The Foundations of
United States Policy
toward Latin America

HEMISPHERE APART



JOHN J. JOHNSON

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*The Foundations of United States
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John J. Johnson

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THE JOHNS HOPKINS SYMPOSIA IN COMPARATIVE HISTORY

The Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History are occasional volumes sponsored by the Department of History at the Johns Hopkins University and the Johns Hopkins University Press comprising original essays by leading scholars in the United States and other countries. Each volume considers, from a comparative perspective, an important topic of current historical interest. The present volume is the fifteenth. Its preparation has been assisted by the James S. Schouler Lecture Fund.

To Maurine with Love

PREFACE

This study reappraises early United States–Latin American relations from an Anglo-American perspective. To explain the pronounced shift from a pro-insurgent view prior to independence to one of limited interest, if not disdain, for the peoples and institutions of the emerging republics by 1830, the book looks beyond the facade of diplomatic events, personalities, and the presumed unity of aspirations toward a common ethos between North and South to underlying domestic factors in the United States, Latin America, and the United Kingdom that were critical in shaping the U.S. view of its (new) southern neighbors. The shadowy and usually neglected subject of ethnic and racial perceptions in the United States and their impact on Anglo-American attitudes toward the alien peoples of Latin America are treated in detail.

The book moves beyond traditional studies in ranking the ingredients that influenced U.S. attitudes according to their relative impact on those attitudes. Whether or not the assessments are in the main sustained—it is assumed that some informed individuals will take exception to them—the approach has the merit of making the examination of the U.S. perspectives on the hemisphere at once more manageable and meaningful.

No claim is made that the determinants of policy during the years 1815 to 1830 would be equally applicable in an earlier or later epoch. Nonetheless, the complexity and confused state of present-day international relations do not conceal that in them one finds more than mere glimmerings of why a cloud of misunderstanding, apprehension, and distrust has overhung hemispheric relations for most of two centuries.

I learned a great deal from the project; I hope that my readers do also.

During the course of my research on this book I became indebted to a number of institutions devoted to the preservation of historical

records and to individuals who devote themselves to making research rewarding and pleasurable. Georgette Dorn of the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress contributed greatly to making several months working in the division profitable. Joan Loftus, David Rozkuszka, Betty Lum, and Marise Morse of Stanford's Jonsson Library of Government Documents knowledgeably and patiently guided me through the library's extensive holdings of U.S. and British official printed documents. I spent considerable time in the United States National Archives before returning to Stanford where I used recently acquired microfilm copies of materials in the (National) Archives under nearly ideal conditions. Mrs. Johnson and I worked side by side during three summers in the Public Record Office, Kew, England. We take special pleasure in expressing our deep gratitude for having had the opportunity to examine the exciting and marvelously preserved records in that fine institution and to benefit from being able to call upon, as necessary, members of its informed and attentive staff. Finally, my sincere thanks to my thoughtful and conscientious copy editor, Jean Toll.

Financial support for the study came at different times from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Stanford University Emeriti Faculty Development Program, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through the Stanford Center for Latin American Studies, and the National Humanities Center. It was as a fellow at the Center during the academic year 1985-86 that I completed research on the project and began the write-up.

In February 1988, at the invitation of the Department of History, The Johns Hopkins University, I delivered the James S. Schouler Lectures. In the lectures I addressed the major themes discussed in the book and received helpful comments from faculty and students for which I am grateful.

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capacity and determination to survive in a hostile atmosphere. A new spirit of self-reliance marked the beginning of the end of a colonial complex. North Americans ceased to doubt the path of their future or how that path would distinguish their country from other societies. A small-town pastoral society, tenacious of the customary and slow to accept innovation, had given way or was on the brink of giving way to an urban and industrial state, populated by people who shared a faith in the individual, faith in humanity, and faith that perfection not only could be achieved, but could be achieved in the foreseeable future.² A revivalist movement that began at the turn of the century had lost its vitality but not before producing a generation of Protestant clergy who came to recognize better the significance of the separation of church and state. The new-minded clergy were not only less concerned than their predecessors with reconciliation of moral virtues with the morals of the marketplace, but in fact became active propagandists for private enterprise and industrial capitalism.

With the war behind it, with the physical security of its western frontier generally assured, and with its economy almost totally free from external pressures, the Republic was at liberty to devote its attention and energies to industrial and infrastructural development and to opening up and securing its claim to an enormously enlarged national domain.³ A "boomtown" optimism prevailed, nourished first by natural and then by technological abundance.⁴ Perseverance, frugality, and an aura of urgency, ebullience, and mission characterized the era. Laborers steeped in the work ethic were resourceful and not easily deterred by difficulties.⁵ The cult of the self-made man was universally accepted as was the idea of progress.⁶ Abroad, the nation was variously stigmatized as radical, materialistic, utilitarian, a menace, a stirrer of dissension, and its people as rustics given to whiskey imbibing and tobacco chewing, and incapable of achievement in the arts, but these attitudes did little to shake the new society's confidence in itself and its future.⁷

Europe's popular elements, weary of war and taxes and unaware or uncaring about the accounts of travelers who claimed to have been struck by the disparities between the "golden dream" and the vulgar realities of slavery, were by the thousands flocking to its shores, attracted by plenty of land obtainable on a freehold basis.⁸ The newcomers were party to transforming a stable and homogeneous society into one of epic change, notable for its mobility and heterogeneity. Some feared that the pride and prosperity that came with independence and the quickening drift toward a secularist society threatened the nation's underpinnings. For the present, however, it was accepted as a self-evident truth that the United States would have a glorious future.

Nationalism, religious activities, physiographic expansion, economic change, and ethnic challenges all influenced the evolution of the nation's foreign policy objectives. By the early Jacksonian era that policy had become so narrowly nationalistic in motivation as at times to give the impression that the rest of the world was unimportant to the nation's welfare. Nowhere was the new view of the world more apparent than in the realm of U.S. relations with the polities being created out of the disintegrating Iberian empires.

The Weakness of the Ex-Colonies

In Latin America, meanwhile, the fruits of victory were bitter. Everywhere a heavy burden of prejudice, custom, and a colonial mentality remained. As the struggles wore on, provincialism and localism destroyed any sense of national unity. The students of the Enlightenment who initially propounded justifications for rebellion were forced to surrender leadership to elite groups composed of the landed aristocracy and their urban constituents, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and the officer corps of the various armed forces, who first usurped and then monopolized power. Thus authoritarians born in America replaced authoritarians born in Spain and Portugal. Under the new authoritarians facts prevailed against constitutions. The juridic concept of representative democracy was not repudiated; it was ignored. The Church was encouraged to continue as the interpreter of the social value system. Manual laborers had no sense of their stake in progress and good government; they were left to vegetate on the outskirts of national life. Only cultured elements had any real or permanent standards and traditions, and they were blind to the possible evils that those standards and traditions might bring to societies suddenly left to their own resources.

Elite domination also meant economic victory for the countryside. The rural emphasis forestalled commercial and industrial development. When it became apparent that Latin Americans lacked the capital and the organizational and administrative skills to compete successfully in the North Atlantic trading community foreigners moved in to fill the deficiency. They took over international trade and, thus positioned, used their clout to direct domestic economic development toward production of the commodities that would earn foreign exchange, which could, in turn, be used to purchase imported manufactures.

Overall, then, the prospects for the former colonies appeared indeed bleak. Except for Brazil, they had opted for republicanism rather than monarchy, much to the satisfaction of Washington, but other-

wise they had not turned out as the United States had hoped. There were no indications whatever that the republics would soon influence in any significant way the future of the Western world or even learn from it. Taking as cues the region's political instability, its racial mélange, its social inequities, and its economic backwardness, Washington concluded that for the foreseeable future attention to the republics could be safely reduced. That conclusion reinforced the official position that the U.S. future lay in promoting domestic growth while holding foreign nations at arm's length elsewhere in the hemisphere.

The Preeminence of Great Britain

Great Britain had a major influence on the evolution of U.S.-Latin American relations during the 1815-30 epoch. Prior to London's recognition of the republics, beginning in 1824-25, His Majesty's Government's affiliations with Spain and the Holy Alliance were critical to the outcome of Washington's negotiations with Spain over the Floridas, to events leading to U.S. recognition of the new nations, and to the proclamation of President James Monroe in 1823. Following their emancipation the ex-colonials looked to Great Britain, not the United States, as their military protector, as their source of investment capital, manufactured goods, including war matériel, and as arbiter of their disputes, for example, in the conflict between Brazil and Argentina over the Banda Oriental (Uruguay). Although London followed Washington's lead in acknowledging the sovereignty of the new states, because of Great Britain's paramount standing with the republics, in most cases Washington reacted to what London did, or was thought to be doing, in respect to Latin America, rather than the reverse. Washington and London were careful not to take arbitrary stands on such issues as monarchism, republicanism, African slavery, privateering, and trade treaties; had they, it is problematical what the consequences would have been.

There is, however, no doubt whatever that the attempted control of Cuba by one or the other side would have put the two nations on a collision course. In the era of sailing ships, the island's strategic importance was a geopolitical fact no trading nation could ignore. In the hands of a major world power—the United States was already recognized as such—Cuba had the potential to be the key to the commercial and military domination of the entire Caribbean Basin. Its "neutrality" was critical to U.S. strategic defenses and to the growth of the trans-Appalachian West and to Great Britain's trade with its West Indian colonies. Thus between 1815 and 1830 every important

move toward Latin America from Washington or London was taken with an eye as to how the other would react regarding Cuba.

Anglo-American Perceptions

The book places considerable emphasis on the perceptions of U.S. private citizens and public officials of themselves and of Latin Americans and their institutions. That aspect of the volume, distinguishing it from other studies requires elaboration.

By perceptions I mean those images that, based on their repeated appearances in the historical records, can be taken to represent, not in a systematic way, but in a general way, the values, beliefs, ideas, and prejudices of a given group. Much like cartoon symbols or clues—dark- or fair-skinned people, firm or receding chins, males or females, adults or children, all of which are loaded with either positive or negative values—perceptions make possible instant, intuitive cognition. They are the mental shortcuts used to assign values to things and peoples. In this study, I have used perceptions/images primarily to establish the ethnocentric attitudes of the opinion elites—those who left written records and who held nearly all economic, social, political, and military power—in the United States, and secondarily of their counterparts in Great Britain. I have not been concerned with the fall of certain perceptions from intellectual respectability. By their very nature perceptions are ambiguous and their influence on societal beliefs or public policy impossible accurately to measure. I have assumed that perceptions provide more than hints, but less than irrefutable pieces of evidence. This is to say, my opinions of how Anglo-Americans reacted to Latin Americans are necessarily largely matters of interpretation. Because of the nature of the discussion in chapter 2, the words *race*, *racial*, and *race relations* appear frequently in this volume. The words *racist* and *racism*, do not appear at all except in this Introduction and the Epilogue.

Inspired by contacts with “primitive peoples” of the New World, Africa, and Australia, individuals in the United States were intensely interested in racial types that separated mankind. Their opinions about these types could have been informed by a variety of pseudosciences in the public domain by the 1820s—catastrophism, craniology, phrenology, and the study of facial angle and hair texture—in the classification of races. Those pseudosciences became integral to the ideology of racists, defined as groups who have held a correlation between the physical characteristics and moral and intellectual qualities and divided mankind into superior and inferior stocks, and who after

1850 in the United States sought to "prove" the inferiority of racial groups in the degree to which they varied from the "white" norm. Each of the pseudosciences provides strong evidence that in questions of the human race scientific methods were abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century in favor of uncritical speculation.

Anglo-Americans in the early nineteenth century, however, overwhelmingly accepted biblical authority and chronology that man originated from a single pair and was created in a perfect state, and that in the dispersion of mankind after the destruction of the Tower of Babel some tribes had sunk into barbarism. Their views placed Anglo-Americans, a few dissenters to the contrary, squarely on the side of environmentalists and culturalists who explained variations in the human species in terms of climate, food, dress, and modes of living. In sum, they believed in learned behavior rather than in inherited traits. Their perceptions of the main racial groups in Latin America were consistent with that belief.

When treating prejudices and attitudes, as I do in chapter 2, I have chosen to use derivatives of the Greek *ethnos*—ethnic, ethnicity, ethnocentrism. Ethnic attitudes and prejudices have evaluative connotations and serve to identify human beings with their own people as against the rest of humanity. At one level they provide the cement of cultural unity by encouraging thinking in terms of groups rather than individuals. On another level they tend to produce contempt for foreign people, the degree of contempt tending to vary with the degree of contact and the differential elements groups hold to be important. Race, skin color, nationality, language, institutional characteristics, and, to a declining degree, religion have been the most commonly recognized differential factors in peacetime. In wartime or in periods preceding the actual outbreak of hostilities, the criteria for acceptance or rejection may, of course, fluctuate wildly.

The Historical Approach

Some words about substance and sources and certain assumptions. This volume treats the subject of hemispheric relations essentially from the U.S. angle of vision. *It does not presume to treat Latin Americans on their own terms.* My justification for taking that approach is that, throughout the period under review, the initiative of the United States was dominant in U.S.–Latin American relations.

This is not a study in U.S.–Latin American diplomatic relations of the Charles Griffin, Joseph Byrne Lockey, Dexter Perkins, Arthur P. Whitaker, Samuel Flagg Bemis genre. Those distinguished historians constructed their accounts basically around hemispheric "happen-

ings." Those happenings serve mainly as guideposts in this volume. My objective has been not so much to detail the happenings as to establish the context in which they took place. It will become evident to my readers that I have little fascination with sensational events.

I have treated the 1810s and 1820s as a discrete historical period. Attitudes, beliefs, and values held then are not necessarily applicable to any earlier or later time. I believe strongly that the ethical priorities and imperatives of the twentieth century should not be imposed on the patterns of early nineteenth-century thought. I believe, nonetheless, that for at least three reasons ethnic attitudes have a strong tendency to remain a part of an inherited body of cultural experiences. The first is that impressions of foreign peoples are to a large degree formed in childhood and usually in the family group; prejudices, thus, tend to be internalized before adulthood.⁹ Second, elites continually recruit from the rank and file and consequently share in its prejudices.¹⁰ Third, whatever a person's private sentiments, his or her public behavior strongly tends to adapt to prevailing climates of opinion.¹¹

Examining the Evidence

The scope of this study obliged me to rely in varying degrees on the work of numerous modern scholars. My reliance is particularly apparent in chapter 1, which deals primarily with domestic issues confronting the United States, and in chapter 4, which treats U.S.-British relations as they related to Latin America. I am delighted to acknowledge my indebtedness and I ask the indulgence of those who influenced my thinking, but whom I neither cite nor identify. Still, traditional documentary sources—manuscripts and published official materials, contemporary newspapers, journals, textbooks, and travel accounts—provided the core data of the book. Each of those categories, valuable as it was, given the time frame of my undertaking, yielded something less than incontrovertible evidence. Official documents, prepared by agents in the field, I suspect, were often prepared with an eye to what superiors at home wanted to hear. Politicians, whom I consider to be major exemplars of the age, already had a well-developed reputation for being adept at exploiting the common knowledge, traditions, and prejudices of their constituents. Their public pronouncements and theatrics in regard to hemispheric affairs, therefore, have been viewed against a domestic backdrop.

The extent to which newspapers molded public opinion is not easily determined, but that they were widely circulated and mirrored contemporary interests appears evident. So popular were newspapers,

the *New York Observer* dared assert that "in no part of the world does the newspaper possess so extensive an influence as in our country. It is estimated that in the whole union, there are at least five hundred newspaper establishments, from which are issued annually more than thirty million sheets."¹² The reading of a representative sample of newspapers from across the nation confirmed, to my satisfaction, the claim of the *New York Commercial Advertiser* of June 29, 1821, that a newsworthy article on Buenos Aires it had previously published had "gone the rounds of most of the papers of the United States."

The spirit of discovery ran strong in the late eighteenth century. Spain, France, and Great Britain each sponsored major scientific expeditions, and those directed by Captain James Cook and Alexander von Humboldt were probably the best known to the English-speaking community. The interests of the scientists tended toward botanical research, but they amassed a great deal of ethnographic data.¹³ Nonscientists—adventurers, businessmen, public officials, churchmen—simultaneously joined the race to "discover" what lay in the far corners of the earth. Their interests were more in people, customs, and institutions, less in the natural sciences. The reading public in the United States avidly sought the reports of the latter group because they were easy reading and their contents generally understandable. The *American Quarterly Review* astutely observed: "The press in our day teems with books of travels under the various titles of Journals, Tours, Views, Sketches, Rough Notes, &c. which are all readily bought up by our 'great reading public,' who find themselves thus enabled, with little expense and no hardships to travel at home and perform voyages by the Fireside."¹⁴ Such accounts, however, usually reflected the shock that authors experienced on initial contact with distant lands, "strange" peoples, and unfamiliar surroundings. As a consequence, travel accounts tended to stress the exotic rather than the commonplace.¹⁵ In the case of Latin America, because of the problems of transportation and security, visitors for the most part remained in the major port cities and wrote from that point of view. Life in the agricultural and grazing regions was commonly neglected. Textbook authors consciously promoted the fear of God and love of country. They nearly always judged foreign cultures by U.S. standards, or British standards when British textbooks were published in the United States with but minor substantive changes, a common practice.¹⁶

That the documents reveal little regarding the views of the general public is regrettable, but not critical. The public, concerned as it was with family and local issues, was essentially inattentive to foreign affairs. When they thought at all about foreign issues their thoughts tended to focus on Europe, where their ancestral ties and

economic and security interests were strong, not on Latin America, about which they were only vaguely knowledgeable.¹⁷ Furthermore, as H. Stuart Hughes has, I believe, rightly observed, the fund of ideas available at any particular time to individuals who have received a superior general education are the ideas that eventually inspire government elites.¹⁸

In summary, I make no claim to having discovered new documentary sources; much is in fact standard fare. I believe that I have read and digested more than a representative number of the traditional materials. I have also read the documents with other than standard purposes in mind and I am confident that I have used them to focus on certain issues that they have not served before. Since the documents I used yielded few reliable enumerative materials, I have made no attempt to quantify the intensity of the feelings and beliefs of Anglo-Americans toward "out-groups."

Despite the ambiguous nature of my evidence I have been basically comfortable with it in establishing how contemporaries in the United States viewed Latin Americans and their institutions. I have not always been comfortable about how my observations on racial attitudes in the United States and Great Britain may be interpreted and used. With that concern in mind I wish at this point to make explicit my objectives in examining racial attitudes. First to explain the waxing and waning of U.S. and British interest in Latin America I had to comprehend, as best I could, the social order being created in those societies, and second, historians of early nineteenth-century hemispheric affairs have largely avoided the role of perceptions as a determinant in those relations. For my part, I believe that impulses, whether rational or irrational, have played a part historically in determining what is "right" and what is "wrong" in international relations; to put it another way, in international affairs opinions are often more influential than truths. As I have already suggested, in bringing up the question of racial attitudes I have had no interest in exposing human frailties or in debunking any people's past or in getting caught up in the niceties of ideological debates. Rather, my sole interest has been to explain a historical condition.

Finally, I hope that I have identified which questions were significant in explaining the sudden changes of interest in the United States toward Latin America in the 1815-30 era. I hope, too, that I have not invented an approach that makes things look smaller the farther away they are, and I hope most of all that I have avoided many of the opportunities to commit logical suicide that impressionistic studies and speculation invite.