



# TROUBLED NEIGHBORS

*The Story of US-Latin American  
Relations from FDR to the Present*



**HENRY RAYMONT**

A Century Foundation Book

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Published in the United States of America by Westview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group. Find us on the world wide web at [www.westviewpress.com](http://www.westviewpress.com).

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Raymont, Henry.

Troubled neighbors: the story of US–Latin American relations, from FDR to the present / Henry Raymont.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-4303-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Latin America—Foreign relations—United States. 2. United States—Foreign relations—Latin America. 3. United States—Foreign relations—20th century. 4. Latin America—Foreign relations—20th century. I. Title.

F1418.R39 2005

327.8073'09'045—dc22

2004021687

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## FOREWORD

During the second half of the twentieth century, World War II and the Cold War defined the central interests of US policy in the Americas. “Our own backyard,” in this context, was an arena where our view of the world should be paramount, with other, more local considerations relegated to secondary status. From time to time, when an issue, an insurrection or a dictator forced special concern, the US response would be swift and usually heavy-handed. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy, Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, Bush’s Enterprise for the Americas Initiative and other forward-looking enterprises sometimes seemed to offer the hope that there would be a permanent shift in approach, but all proved to be temporary. With tiresome certainty, American policy would slip back into the unfortunate mix of inattention, rigidity and occasional insistence.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, there have been significant changes in relations between the United States and its southern neighbors. Unencumbered by the potentially life-and-death imperatives of the struggle against a hostile Soviet Union, American political leaders have been eager, at least sometimes, to rebuild relationships based on questions that go far beyond the former emphasis on undermining regimes seen as too “soft on communism” and supporting those governments, whatever their other characteristics, that were staunchly pro-American. Over the same decade and a half, the movement of many of the countries of Central and South America from military or one-party rule to civilian and democratic government has made progress on broader economic and political matters more practical and likely. Overall, for the first time, widespread and enduring democracy coupled with steady and broad-based economic growth seems likely to become the norm for most nations in the Americas.

The adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement by the United States, Canada and Mexico, of course, is the outstanding example of a breakthrough in policy of real substance. On a more rhetorical but still important

front, the advocacy by both the Clinton and Bush (II) administrations of freer trade with several South American nations has signaled a possible long-term agenda for wider cooperation. Still, much of American policy toward Latin American nations can be characterized as a patchwork approach. The simple fact is that, most often, statesmen in the United States more or less intentionally want to keep the region off the list of high-priority areas.

While the relationship between the United States and its southern neighbors has been and is of considerable scholarly interest, the subject remains evergreen for attention. Geography is inescapable, and so is the shared destiny of the New World's peoples. This work, by Henry Raymont, a knowledgeable observer of the region, builds on that premise to provide fresh insights into the past and important advice about the future.

Raymont, currently a syndicated columnist for a number of Latin American papers, has been a journalist specializing in Latin American issues for five decades, first with the *United Press* and then with the *New York Times*. In addition, he has served as director of cultural affairs at the Organization of American States; been a senior fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy; and received a Nieman Fellowship for his reporting from Cuba.

Ultimately, the question that Raymont explores is that of leadership. He asks, in effect, given particular conditions, to what extent did each president choose to pursue constructive policies with regard to the Americas. In this sense, explanations of US policy that, for example, assert that preoccupation with Cold War concerns accounts for the behavior of this administration or that one miss a key question. For, even within the limits imposed by the particular urgencies of the global contest with the Soviet Union, there were real choices to be made, questions of emphasis, calculations of long-term interests, beliefs about what works and what does not. Strong leadership in foreign policy, Raymont would argue, can change the calculus of the possible, reshape the public (and media) agenda and overcome the forces of the status quo and the resistance of partisan opposition.

The fact that leadership and competence matter may seem a commonplace observation. But, in these times of relative political timidity, it is a point well worth remaking. Moreover, presenting solid evidence of the abiding significance of policymakers, as Raymont's book does, provides an important reminder that we have the right to hold them accountable. In other words, our leaders, our nation and our neighbors are not in the grip of uncontrollable international forces. We can do much to shape our common destiny.

This book adds to The Century Foundation's long-standing interest in American foreign policy. It is a major contribution to our list of studies of

Latin America, which includes such landmark books from the late 1960s and early 1970s as Albert O. Hirschman's *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America* and Jerome Levinson and Juan de Onís's *The Alliance That Lost Its Way: A Critical Report on the Alliance for Progress*, as well as our series on Latin American debt in the mid-1980s and studies of individual nations in the region over the next two decades, including Lincoln Gordon's *Brazil's Second Chance: En Route Toward the First World*. It also meshes with our examinations of democracy and the making of foreign policy in such studies as Tony Smith's *America's Mission*, Walter Russell Mead's *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Henry Nau's *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*, Robert Art's *A Grand Strategy for America* and Kathryn Sikkink's *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America*.

On behalf of the Trustees of The Century Foundation, I thank Raymont for his thoughtful description of US–Latin American affairs. His insights into how American policy choices have shaped those relations is a special contribution to our understanding of these matters.

*Richard C. Leone, President  
The Century Foundation*

## PROLOGUE

Our first and fundamental maxim should be, never to engage ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to intermeddle with cis-Atlantic affairs. *America, North and South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her own.* She should therefore have a system of her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. While the last is laboring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavor should surely be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, LETTER TO PRESIDENT MONROE,  
OCTOBER 24, 1823 (EMPHASIS ADDED)

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Rarely have two consecutive periods of US foreign relations been more starkly delineated than the decade of hemispheric friendship generated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy toward Latin America and its subsequent erosion as succeeding administrations became absorbed by the Cold War. Indeed, never have successive US administrations been so consistent in squandering such a reservoir of goodwill. Yet the story of the unraveling of US–Latin American ties, beginning almost immediately after FDR's death, has received very little attention in our time.

Since the end of World War II, Roosevelt has been hailed as the architect of the New Deal and a great wartime leader. But historians and even some of his most notable biographers have shown little interest in the legacy of the Good Neighbor policy, a neglect that is all the more surprising when one considers the importance FDR accorded it, how vivid an imprint that policy left south of the border and the abundant Latin American sources that remained untapped.



There is a plausible reason for this neglect: the prevailing theme of inter-American relations during the postwar years was one of tragedy—missed opportunities, divergent perceptions, unrequited friendship, errors and misconceptions. It was not testimony to creative policy. The Cold War swung the US foreign policy focus away from the principles of the Good Neighbor, subordinating the idealistic goal of spreading democracy to the pragmatic decision of fighting communism, by any means. That resulted in the often counterproductive tendency to succor autocratic regimes as a handy political expedient in the increasingly dirty war to contain “Sino-Soviet expansion.”

To Latin Americans their abrupt displacement from postwar US strategic cosmology was stunning, the more given that the region had been at the core of FDR’s foreign policy. It most certainly was not what Latin America had envisioned: the end of the war was to have been a moment for the American republics to celebrate the restoration of the Good Neighbor to the core of US foreign policy so that the hemispheric community could jointly face the uncertainties of the postwar era. The unsung demise of FDR’s reforms is one of the most futile, self-defeating chapters of US diplomatic history. My experiences and observations as a journalist reporting from Latin America and Washington on the state of inter-American relations for almost half a century, roughly corresponding to the period under review, leads me to conclude that these years deserve closer examination. Apart from the drama and romance, the tragedy and pathos, the unraveling of the Good Neighbor offers a textbook example of what Harvard economist John D. Montgomery describes as “the tarnished outcome” of US foreign policy initiatives containing “traces of US idealism.” However, “the follow through was deplorably inadequate” and “indifference again succeeded noble beginnings.”<sup>1</sup>

The Roosevelt era was unparalleled in taking hemispheric relations to the most constructive level in the twentieth century. The relationship between 1933 and 1945 indicates that when the United States applies thoughtful diplomacy to hemispheric affairs and uses multilateral institutions to promote democracy, US and Latin American interests are well served. The question today is, Is the inter-American system still viable, and does it serve US interests in a post-Cold War world?

Current Latin American attitudes and policies reflect the historical forces that formed them. The statecraft, learned over a period of more than a century, first through the Pan American movement, then the inter-American system, offers important precedents and lessons. How early must collective measures be used to contain a government that threatens its neighbors or commits human rights violations? How wise is a policy of economic sanctions and/or military force,

even if it is approved by a multinational body? How can we minimize miscalculation and misperception? Can international and regional organizations take the place of traditional balance-of-power politics? This book attempts to overcome Washington's chronic tendency to overlook its own best antecedents.

A reappraisal of many events and public figures in US–Latin American relations is in order. Few, if any, of the recent popular biographies of US presidents even mention Latin America. By contrast, this work makes an effort to bring a Latin American perspective to the assessment of the presidencies that followed Roosevelt's. Thus, some statesmen we have been taught to respect will appear in these pages in sorry roles, whereas some neglected personalities were quite important from a Latin American vantage point. Josephus Daniels, Roosevelt's ambassador to Mexico, was important for his steadfast advocacy of nonintervention in opposition to Sumner Welles's conventional "Big Stick" diplomacy in Cuba; George Kennan was extremely persuasive in warning against the communist threat to Latin America and overwhelmed such State Department specialists as Louis Halle, who struggled to keep alive the Good Neighbor policy and pleaded with Truman to address the region's postwar social and economic distress; Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek's 1958 hemispheric development plan, Operation Pan America, was an imaginative "wake-up call" to restore hemispheric cooperation, which, had Washington been more cooperative, might well have forestalled the anti-American sentiment that a year later rallied around the Cuban revolution.

Events such as the Chapultepec, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota and Punta del Este conferences, which were major building blocks in the construction of the inter-American system, are not covered extensively in this volume because they are dealt with elsewhere. Nor do issues and events in Latin America that by and large conformed to the East–West perspective that animated Washington and caught the attention of the media and scholarship require detailed treatment here. In the case of hemispheric events that achieved global significance, such as the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, the Falkland/Malvinas war of 1982 and President Reagan's Central American policy and the invasions of Grenada and Panama, an abundance of memoirs and strategic analyses are now available. They are, therefore, treated here only chronologically and in less detail than they deserve.

This work may indicate some of the conditions necessary to provide more effective, viable policy alternatives and stimulate a wider debate on US–Latin American relations. Is it desirable and feasible for Washington to recover the Good Neighbor spirit and modernize and revitalize the inter-American system? Is it in the mutual interest of the United States and Latin America?

The discrepancies between doctrine and practice in US policy toward Latin America deserve attention, perhaps because they are not greatly different from the discrepancies that prevail in international relations as a whole. To illustrate these divergences takes only a comparison between the ritualistic protestations of Latin American fraternity and regional unity as they disappear when they clash with national interests. But most importantly, we must address the question of what makes Latin America such a difficult, elusive subject for the United States to understand. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other economic relations draw the United States and Latin America ever more together, but the awareness of historical and cultural commonalities lags far behind. The arguments underscoring the importance of a regional market in terms of trade and investments have recently received much media attention. Future relations might be greatly enhanced if our appreciation of our neighbors went beyond immediate objectives.

A reassessment of hemispheric relations is especially significant at this juncture, when a new political topography suggests a world organized not so much by antagonistic ideologies as by the emergence of economic blocs, such as NAFTA, the European Union and a Pacific Rim dominated by Japan. With a younger, more vigorous leadership and a concerted effort to reform the Organization of American States (OAS) as well as national governments across the hemisphere, we are approaching the twenty-first century as a time of promise and uncertainty not unlike the 1930s, when all the American republics, the United States included, were in the midst of great flux and renewal.

*Henry Raymond*

#### NOTE

1. John D. Montgomery, *Aftermath: Tarnished Outcomes of American Foreign Policy* (Dover, Mass.: Auburn House, 1986), p. xii.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Newspaper writers, particularly those who learn the trade in the trenches of the wire services, can pound out at least half a dozen stories in less than half a day. So when I first approached what was then called the Twentieth Century Fund and promised to have the book ready in “a year, if not before that,” I received a knowing smile from the Fund’s then director, Murray Rossant, a former financial writer I had met when we both worked at the *New York Times*. He went on to say, “Better give yourself a little more time—books are different from daily journalism.” Almost twenty years later, I must thank Murray for his advice, as well as thank his successor, Richard C. Leone, the current president of The Century Foundation; a procession of editors; and a long list of my own family members and friends who were unflagging in their encouragement.

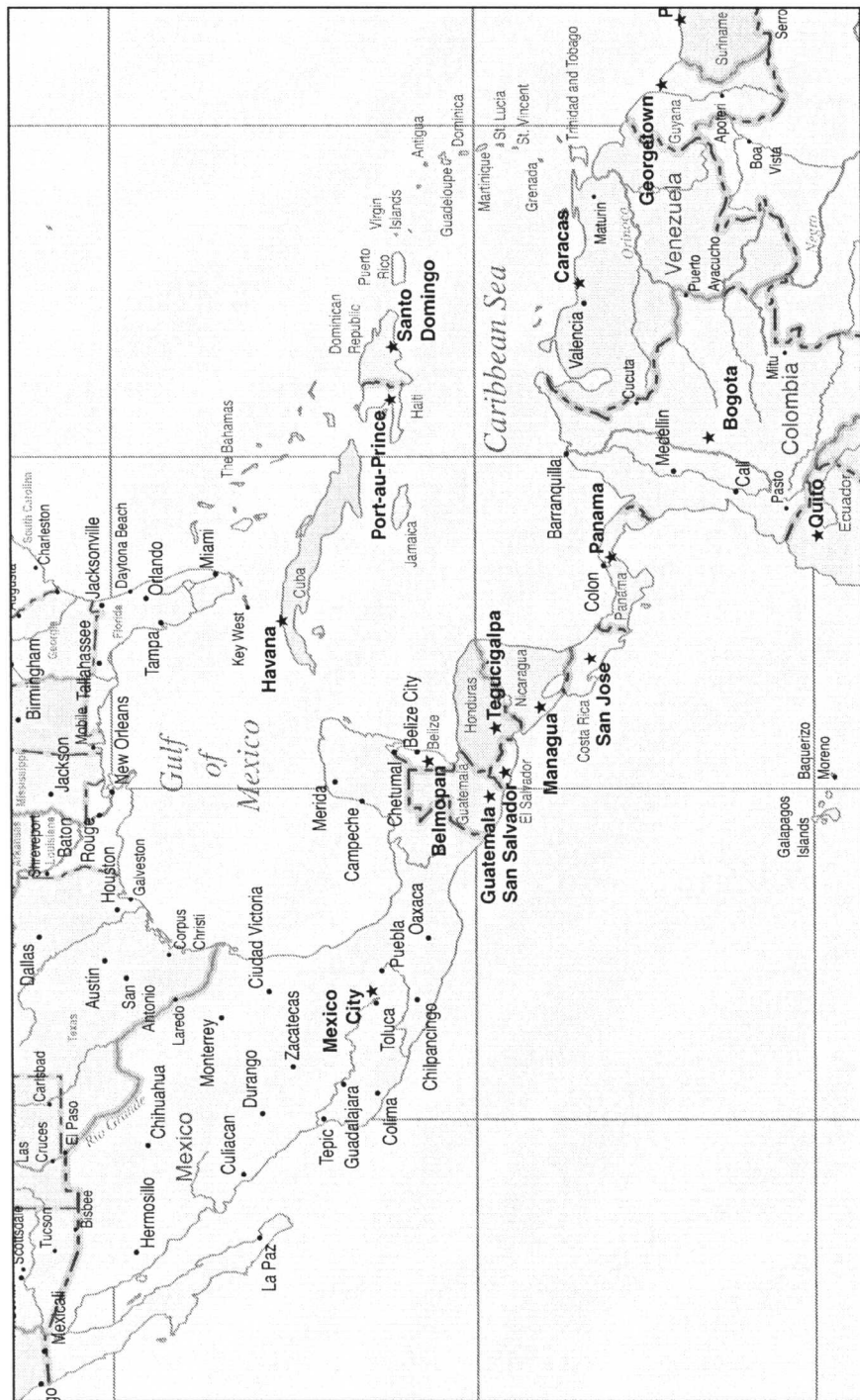
My wife Wendy was amazingly stalwart in her trust in me, and our children, Daniel, Sarah, and Adam, helped with taunts that at the present pace the book might be finished “when we become grandparents.” Putting “finis” to the book manuscript was not exactly helped by my daily newspaper column in Spanish or my teaching a course on US–Latin American relations at the Freie Universitaet in Berlin. In fact, there was a well-founded suspicion abroad that some of that activity was undertaken precisely to ward off completing the book.

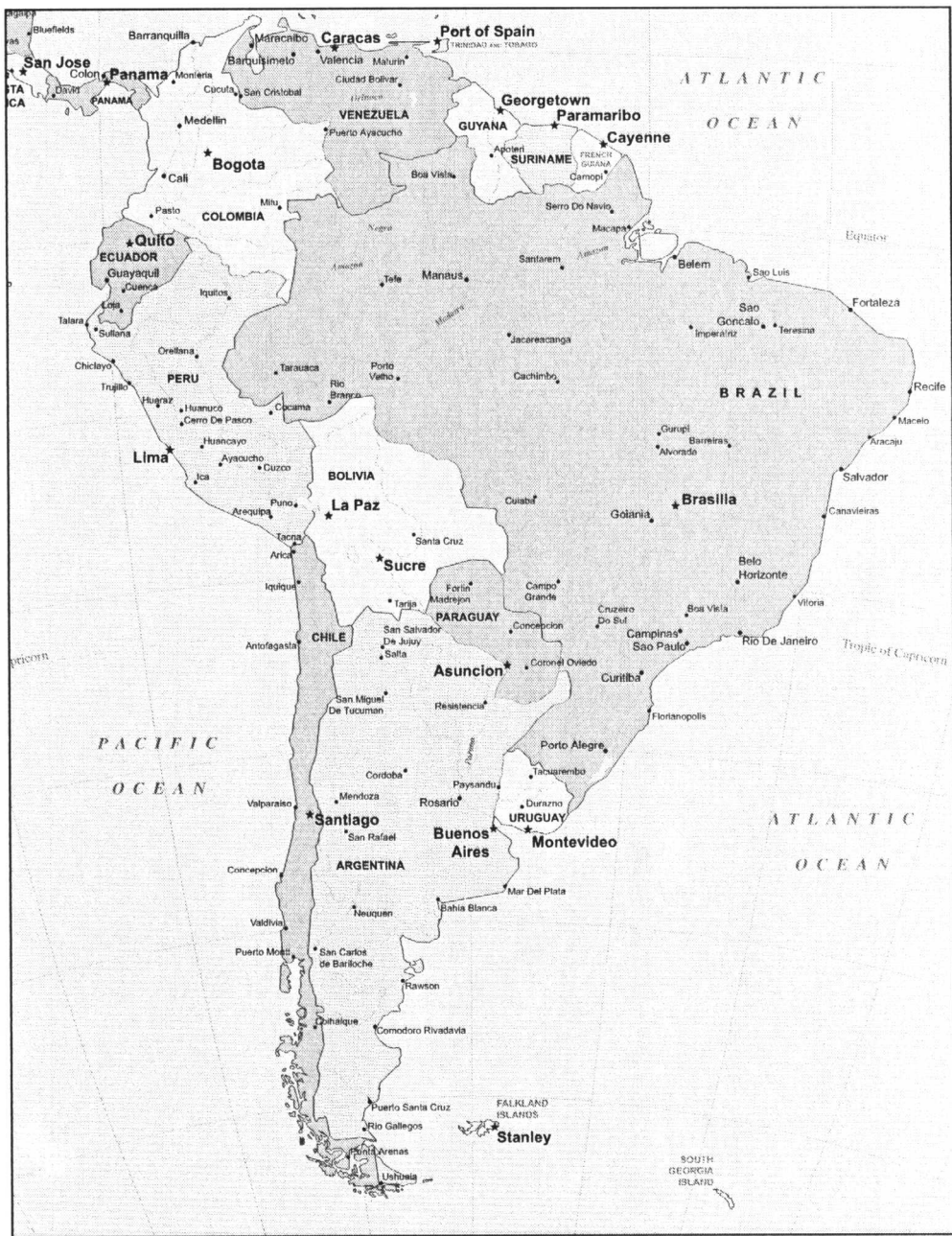
That said, I hasten to recognize how greatly indebted I am to Jason Renker, my most recent editor at The Century Foundation, who has so diligently improved my tenses and smoothed out Latinate words where Anglo synonyms were available. I am also thankful that Westview Press decided to publish the book.

I should particularly stress my debt to Beverly Goldberg, the director of publications at The Century Foundation, and to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a member of the board, who never faltered in their trust that at the end of the road there would be a valuable book on Latin America, an area that receives little enough attention from the US mainstream.

And a few lifelong friends who thoughtfully cajoled and prodded to get the manuscript off the drawing board—the late Paul Hirsch and Arturo Frondizi of Buenos Aires, and Ambassador Felipe Seixas Correa and his wife Marilu. Similarly, my conservative friend, Allan Gerson, and Tad Szulc, my colleague in the four corners of the globe, first at the United Press and then at the *New York Times* and eventually our neighbor in Washington. Also, Daniel Samper and Carlos Fuentes, who have brightened both journalism and the literary scene of Latin America with their sardonic humor and uncompromising criticism.

My appreciation also to the inspiration and friendship of Jorge Batlle, the former president of Uruguay; Celso Lafer, Gabriel Valdes Subercasseaux, and Oscar Camilion, former foreign ministers of Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, respectively; Ambassadors Carlos Portales of Chile, and Enrique Cantoni of Argentina, the dean of the Latin American envoys in Berlin; Samuel Lewis Navarro, the foreign minister of Panama, and his late father, Gabriel Lewis Galindo.





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## *Chapter One*

# INTRODUCTION

Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.

MARC BLOCH, 1942

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The societies that cannot combine reverence toward their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.

ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

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The history of relations between the United States and Latin America is marked by contradictions and an erratic course. US policy on the one hand has been described as idealistic, the reflection of a benign nation willing to share its democratic experiment with the rest of the world, and on the other hand as seeking to impose on its neighbors to the south some of the colonial policies it has repudiated since the time of the Revolutionary War.

Latin America continues to be a singularly elusive, perplexing subject for US policymakers. In five decades of reporting on inter-American affairs, the question I have encountered most frequently and puzzled over most often is, Why does Latin America seem to be such an impenetrable subject in the United States? Or, to put it another way, why has Latin America been considered such a marginal subject by practically every administration in Washington after Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Sometimes the question is aired in ceremonial speeches by a momentarily puzzled secretary of state and a few ritual