

Chapter 5

The Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary

We shall consider any attempt on their part to impose their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety as a manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

The famous Monroe Doctrine, which was first proclaimed in 1823, contained the words quoted above. At the time, Russia, France, Prussia, and Austria were trying to help Spain get back the American colonies that had overthrown her rule, and Russia wanted land on what is now our west coast. The U.S. announced that it was against any foreign power imposing its 'system' in the western hemisphere, and the other countries backed off for reasons that might have had nothing to do with the President's famous proclamation. With one exception (the ill-fated attempt by France to establish an empire in Mexico) the Monroe Doctrine was all but forgotten before the year 1900.

In the early 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt not only invoked the Doctrine but he broadened it by adding his own corollary. Roosevelt said the U.S. had a right to act as an international police force, invading neighboring countries and setting their house in order. His excuse was that, with the U.S. as the cop on the beat, other countries (such as Germany, France, or England) would not have an excuse to cruise around the neighborhood.

But many Americans, and certainly most (though not all) Latin Americans opposed the U.S. playing the role of international policeman. They thought the U.S. did not have a right to land troops and build canals in, or manage the finances of, other countries without their permission. This chapter raises the question about whether the U.S. should have these rights.

Venezuela and the Roosevelt Corollary

On December 13, 1902, a Venezuelan city was attacked by ships from Germany, England, and Italy. The reason for this hostile act was that Venezuela had failed to repay a debt owed to these three countries. News of the attack brought a prompt response from the US President Theodore Roosevelt who sent Admiral Dewey (of Manila harbor fame) on a well-timed maneuver in the Caribbean. Shortly afterwards, the three European countries announced that they would resolve their problems with Venezuela through binding arbitration as Roosevelt had suggested.

The Venezuelan affair prompted President Roosevelt to formulate what is now known as his 'corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine. Roosevelt thought that incidents like the one in Venezuela would be likely to happen again unless the U.S. took a firm stand. Roosevelt reasoned that if the U.S. collected the debts owed European countries they wouldn't have an excuse to take over nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and, in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may

force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power

The Drago Doctrine

Not surprisingly most Latin American countries disagreed with the Roosevelt Corollary. Use of force to collect debts, Luis Drago of Argentina wrote, is wrong. It did not matter to Drago whether the money was owed to American or European governments, private citizens, businessmen, or bankers. Private investors lending money to foreign citizens or governments do so at their own risk. If a country fails to pay what it owes, then it would not be able to borrow any more money. Drago believed that governments have no more right to invade or attack other countries to collect money owed them than a private citizen has the right to use force to collect debts.

The Roosevelt Corollary in the Dominican Republic

In its short history since independence from Spain, the Dominican Republic was unable to establish a successful democratic government. Dominican peasants seldom had enough to eat; they hardly ever had the chance to attend school; and owning their own land was almost as impossible as owning a palace. Like many Latin American countries, the Dominican Republic was ruled by a small elite class of plantation owners, army officers, and businessmen. But they disagreed with one another, and they often stole money from the customs houses where tariffs on imports, the main source of the government's income, were collected.

In 1905, the Dominican Republic reached a crisis point in its finances. It could not pay either the principle owed to foreign bankers or the interest on their loans. The government owed \$32,000,000, with interest at \$2,000,000 per annum, and the government's yearly tax receipts amounted to \$1,700,000.

Roosevelt thought the situation in the Dominican Republic an excellent opportunity to use his corollary. As an 'international policeman,' President Roosevelt negotiated with Dominican officials. He convinced them to promise they would pay American investors and turn over their money from the customs house to the U.S. When payments stopped, a U.S. firm began collecting taxes on imports. The U.S. had made arrangements to have its own citizens' debts repaid, but neglected to get any help for friendly European nations; this omission caused widespread anger in Europe. Roosevelt decided to stop the international complaints by negotiating a new agreement with the Dominicans that reduced their debt. In exchange, Dominicans allowed the U.S. to collect customs duties on incoming goods, and divide the money equally between European and American creditors as well as the Dominican government.

As a result of the agreement Roosevelt negotiated, the Dominican Republic's customs house was administered honestly for the first time in its history. The Dominican Republic remained under financial supervision from 1905-41 even though many Dominicans thought the U.S. should allow them to run their own country without interference. Marines were landed in the Republic in 1913, again from 1916-24, and once again in 1965. To this day people still disagree as to whether the U.S. did the right thing in 1905, and many Dominicans resent the long occupation of their country by the U.S.

Dollar Diplomacy and Other Interventions

The practice of invading Caribbean countries was continued from 1909 to 1913 by President Robert Taft, Roosevelt's handpicked successor. Taft's diplomatic objective in the region around the Panama Canal was to get American bankers to lend money to these countries. He claimed this would save Latin

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American's from running up a debt that European countries would use as excuses to invade. He called attention to the need to protect the sea-lanes leading to the Panama Canal, as well as the Canal itself. But the British press pinned the label, "dollar diplomacy" to President Taft's invasions and the term has stuck.

The practice of the U.S. invading or attempting to overthrow unfriendly governments, and/or to occupy Latin American countries was continued by American presidents right up to the present day, as summarized in the chart below:

Country	Years of Intervention	Country	Years of Intervention
Haiti	1905-41 1995	Panama	1903-1999 1989
Nicaragua	1909-10, 1911-24, 1926-33, 1981-89	Cuba	1898-1902 1906-1909 1917 & 34 1961- present
Mexico	1914 1916-17	Puerto Rico	1901-present
Guatemala	1954	Grenada	1983 •

Three Different Interpretations for America's Latin America Policy

Historians' opinions about the motives for U.S. policies in the Caribbean have been sharply divided. Some believe that the U.S. was merely trying to protect itself from European countries that might build bases close to the U.S. Others claim the U.S. has been bent on helping big businessmen make money. A third school of thought holds that the U.S. was and still is really generous in helping other countries by protecting them against their own mistakes and foreign aggression.

Each of these positions is represented here in the words of men well qualified to speak on the subject. For some 40 years or more Samuel Flagg Bemis has been the dean of diplomatic historians. Smedley Butler, the second author, was a U.S. Marine who participated in a number of the interventions mentioned in this unit. The third author, Eli Root, served as Secretary of State under President Theodore Roosevelt and was directly involved in obtaining the customs receivership in the Dominican Republic.

• Chart does not include diplomatic and financial pressures exerted on these countries; also does not imply that intervention was necessarily either good or bad for the country or was done for self-serving or idealistic motives

Samuel Flagg Bemis Justifies Dollar Diplomacy as Hemisphere Defense

Dollar diplomacy was not designated to profit private interests. It was intended rather to support the foreign policy of the United States; in the instance of Latin America to support the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, Taft was following *the instincts and traditions of continental security*. Nicaragua, like the Dominican Republic, like Panama, like Haiti was one of the states in the entire world where least American capital was invested. It is a well-known fact that it was only with difficulty that the Department of State was able to persuade bankers to invest their funds for political purposes.

Smedley Butler Claims He was a Racketeer for Capitalism

I spent thirty-three years and four months in active service as a member of the country's most agile military force – the Marine corps. And during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism.

Thus I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras "right" for American fruit companies in 1903.

Eli Root Claims U.S. Motivated by Idealism

We believe the independence and equal rights of the smallest and weakest members of the human family of nations are entitled to as much respect as those of the greatest. We deem the observance of that respect the chief guarantee of the weak against the oppression by the strong. We neither claim nor desire any rights, nor privileges, nor powers that we do not freely give to every American Republic. We wish to help all friends in Latin America to a common prosperity and a common growth, that we may all become greater and stronger together.

After looking at a few places where the U.S. used military force, you might be ready to decide what motivated U.S. conduct in its Caribbean policy. Was the United States a muscleman for Wall Street, motivated by a desire to help bankers and big business? Were we motivated mainly by a desire to help other countries, or were we primarily concerned with our own defense? You be the judge.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Contrast the reasoning of the Drago Doctrine with the thinking that supports the Roosevelt Corollary. With which do you agree? State your reasons.
2. Summarize the circumstances relating to the application of the Monroe Doctrine to the Dominican Republic and decide whether this action was justified.
3. Which of the three theories, *defense*, *economics*, or *idealism* best explain the U.S. actions presented in this chapter as well as in the others? Support your conclusions.