

History (19th-early 20th Centuries): The Monroe Doctrine and the United States Politics toward its Neighbours in the Americas

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In 1823, the government of the United States adopted the Monroe Doctrine. Named after a Republican president of the USA, James Monroe, it condemns any European intervention in the affairs of “the Americas.” In reality, the Monroe Doctrine served as cover for a policy of more and more aggressive conquests on the part of the USA to the detriment of the new independent Latin American States, beginning with the annexing of a large part of Mexico in 1840s (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada and Utah). North American troops occupied Mexico’s capital city in September 1847. It should also be pointed out that the government of the USA attempted to exterminate all native peoples, the “redskins,” who refused to submit. And those who did submit were still subjected to atrocities, and ended up on reservations.



In 1898, as we have seen, the United States declared war on Spain and took control of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

In 1902, in contradiction of the Monroe Doctrine, Washington did not come to the defence of Venezuela when it was the victim of armed aggression by Germany, Britain, Italy and Holland with the goal of forcing the country to repay debt. Then the United States intervened diplomatically to see to it that Caracas resumed debt repayment. This attitude on the part of Washington gave rise to a major controversy with Latin American governments, and in particular with the Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luis M. Drago, who declared: *“The principle I would like see recognized is that] a public debt cannot give rise to the right of armed intervention, and much less to the occupation of the soil of any American nation by any European power.”* This principle was to become known as the Drago doctrine. The debate among governments ended in an international conference at The Hague which led to the adoption of the Drago-Porter Convention (from the name of Horace Porter, a United States soldier and diplomat) in 1907. It called for arbitration to be the first means of solving conflicts: any State signing the Convention must agree to submit to an arbitration procedure and participate in it in good faith, failing which the State demanding repayment of its debt would have the right to use armed force.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt organised the creation of Panama, which was separated from

Colombia against the country's will. This was done to allow the Panama Canal to be built under Washington's control.

In 1904, the same president announced that the United States considered itself to be the policeman of the Americas. He pronounced what is known as the "Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine": *"Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the 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 such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power."* [1]



In 1915 the United States invaded Haiti under the pretext of recovering debts and occupied the country until 1934. Eduardo Galeano writes: *"the United States occupied Haiti for twenty years and, in that black country that had been the scene of the first victorious slave revolt, introduced racial segregation and forced labor, killed 1,500 workers in one of its repressive operations (according to a U.S. Senate investigation in 1922), and when the local government refused to turn the Banco Nacional into a branch of New York's National City Bank, suspended the salaries of the president and his ministers so that they might think again"* [2].

Other armed interventions by the United States took place during the same period, but an exhaustive list would be too long.



This brief summary of the intervention and policies of the United States in the Americas in the 19th and early 20th centuries gives us an understanding of Washington's true motives in the debt repudiations in Cuba in 1898 (see [The USA's repudiation of the debt demanded by Spain from Cuba in 1898 : What about Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, etc.?](#)) and Costa Rica in the 1920s (see [What other countries can learn from Costa Rica's debt repudiation](#)).

In 1935, Major General Smedley D. Butler, who took part in many US expeditions in the Americas, writing during his retirement, describes Washington's policies as follows: *"I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico 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 in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make*

Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903.” [3]

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P.S.

* “History: the Policies of the United States toward its Neighbours in the Americas in the 19th and early 20th Centuries”:

<http://www.cadtm.org/History-the-Policies-of-the-United>

* Translated by Snake Arbusto.

Footnotes

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roosevelt_Corollary

[2] Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, Monthly Review Press, 1973, translated by Cedric Belfrage, [online edition](#), *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[3] Published in Common Sense, November 1935. See Leo Huberman, *Man’s Worldly Goods. The Story of the Wealth of Nations*, New York, 1936. Note that an American military base in Okinawa bears the name of Smedley D. Butler. His confession cannot help but remind one of John Perkins’s *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man. The shocking story of how America really took over the world*, Ebury Press, 2005.