Latin America, the League, and the United States

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By Stephen P. Duggan

BEFORE the World War, generally speaking, Latin America was on the periphery of international relations. It did not exert much influence in international affairs, and its foreign relations were mainly with the countries of the western hemisphere, particularly the United States. For the other countries of the world the blue ribbon position in diplomacy might be the ambassadorship in Paris or London; for the Latin American countries it was at Washington. The economic interests of some of the Latin American countries were largely with Europe, but the political relations of all of them with Washington were of vital importance. In comparison, those with other countries were relatively unimportant, with the possible exception of the relations of Argentina with Great Britain.

As the result of the great war-time demand for their cereals, meats, sugar, nitrates, and manganese, Latin Americans were led to change their attitude of mind towards the rest of the world. They discovered that their countries occupied an important place in world economy, and this greatly increased their pride in their own continent and also their self-confidence. Then immediately after the war they were invited to join the League of Nations on a footing of equality with all other nations of the world, including the Great Powers of Europe. This further enhanced their self-esteem, courage, and prestige. During the colonial period the Latin American peoples had been absolutely dominated by Spain and Portugal (except for French rule in Haiti). After their achievement of independence and during the nineteenth century they lived largely in the shadow of the United States. Today they have a growing determination, and it is particularly strong on the part of the stronger and more progressive states, to lead their own lives without acknowledging the tutelage of any other people or state.

The wars of the French Revolution and those waged by Napoleon compelled the European nations to concentrate attention upon the problems of their own continent. This gave opportunity to the Latin American nations to secure their independence. There developed in the early nineteenth century
among all the republics of the western hemisphere a widely diffused sentiment in favor of what was called continentalism. That was the romantic period in the literature of all the American peoples, north and south. Much was made of the recent struggles for independence, of the adoption of republican institutions, of the establishment of new civilizations founded upon liberty and the rights of man. It was felt that these things formed a spiritual bond which in a way united all the nations of the American continent as against Europe, from which it was geographically separated. The attitude was strengthened by the pronouncement of the Monroe Doctrine as an instrument of defense for all the American nations against any attempted aggression by Europe.

The first serious blow to continentalism was our war with Mexico. Since then a series of unfortunate incidents in our relations with some of the Latin American countries has so diluted the old ideal of continentalism, more recently termed Pan Americanism, that little of it remains. As time passed, the elements of dissimilarity and division between them and the United States became more pronounced than the elements of resemblance and unity. Moreover, in the century of slow development after the Latin American countries secured their independence there was little cooperation among them. Indeed, in the course of time a good deal of rivalry developed among the stronger ones, especially Brazil and Argentina, for leadership in Latin America.

The outbreak of the World War resulted in a considerable revival of the spirit of Pan Americanism and of the tendency to follow the leadership of the United States. After the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, thirteen of the twenty Latin American republics also either declared war on Germany or broke off diplomatic relations with her. Ten of these specifically stated that they were animated in so doing by the principle of American solidarity. The community of feeling with the United States, however, did not survive the war. The rejection of the Covenant of the League of Nations by the United States Senate was regarded by Latin America generally as a moral betrayal. The enthusiasm roused by the idealistic speeches of President Wilson rapidly waned and was soon succeeded in some states by a feeling of fear because of the enormously increased power of the United States resulting from the war. Formerly, economic ascendency in South America lay with Great Britain.
and Germany. After the war it passed to the United States, which became dominant both politically and economically.

All the Latin American nations save Ecuador eventually joined the League of Nations. In doing so they were animated in part by different motives; but undoubtedly there were certain ideals and principles which inspired all of them. Throughout the nineteenth century the Latin American nations were weak states from the standpoint of military power. They have always strongly supported methods of arbitration, cooperation, and judicial settlement of international disputes. They regarded the Covenant of the League of Nations as giving universal application to their own traditional policies. This was a source of great pride to them.

Actual membership in the League of Nations strengthened this feeling of pride and self-reliance. In the Council and Assembly of the League the Latin American states sat on a footing of equality with the representatives of the Great Powers, and in course of time their representatives were elected to preside over those bodies and often acted as chairmen of important committees. This was in sharp contrast to the Pan American conferences, where the United States dominated and the Latin American states felt that they occupied a place of inferiority. In fact, there can hardly be any doubt that one of the motives which animated a considerable number of the Latin American nations in joining the League was the belief that it would act as a counterpoise to the United States. Article X of the Covenant, guaranteeing the political independence and territorial integrity of League members, which was largely responsible for causing the Covenant to be rejected by the United States, made a strong appeal to some of the weaker Latin American countries.

The League, on the other hand, aiming as it did at universality, profited by having the Latin American states as members. They helped make up for the absence of the United States and Russia. The eighteen Latin American states which joined the League formed almost one-third of its total membership and went far to relieve the League of the charge that it was essentially a European organization.

Collectively the Latin American states have followed certain policies within the League. One has been to continue to pursue an American continental policy with reference to matters of general
American interest and to settle disputes among themselves at the Pan American conferences rather than at the meetings of the League. Disputes between Latin American states might readily be submitted for settlement to League organs. But as a matter of fact they seldom are. The Latin American nations may not approve the Monroe Doctrine, but they whole-heartedly believe in the tradition behind the Doctrine that non-American states should not interfere in purely American affairs. In the boundary dispute between Panama and Costa Rica in 1921, as well as in the recent Chaco and Leticia disputes, the League Council drew to the attention of the disputants their commitments under the Covenant, but the disputants themselves did not at first voluntarily submit their disputes to the Council.

Individually the various Latin American states have pursued different lines of action at Geneva. During the first six years of the League’s life, Brazil was the most influential of the Latin American member states. She had practically always maintained a friendly attitude towards the policy of the United States in international affairs. Five days after the United States declared war upon Germany, the Brazilian Government handed the German Minister his passports and on October 26 of the same year declared war upon Germany. In doing so she definitively broke the ABC combination which had been formed in 1914, and which had begun to act for South America in Pan American affairs. The other two states of the ABC combination, Argentina and Chile, maintained neutrality throughout the war. Argentina’s international orientation has always been towards Europe rather than towards the United States. Its traditional foreign policy has included a critical attitude towards the United States. As for Chile, the attitude of neutrality it adopted was determined to a considerable extent by the powerful German element included in its population.

The Peace Conference was dominated not by the neutrals but by the victorious Allies. It was natural, then, that these should regard Brazil, who had also been a belligerent, as the leader of the Latin American nations. Her representative at the Peace Conference was made a member of the Committee on the League of Nations; and she was named a member of the Council to serve until the Assembly should elect the non-permanent members. She retained her place as a non-permanent member of the Council until she resigned from the League in 1926. During her period of
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membership, Brazil played a prominent and influential rôle. She had already won the admiration of the League members when the agreement made at Locarno, in 1925, for Germany’s entrance into the League with a permanent seat came up before the Assembly. Brazil maintained that if the number of permanent seats on the Council was to be increased, one should be assigned to her. Europe already had three permanent seats and Asia one. The western hemisphere was unquestionably entitled to a permanent seat, and as the United States refused to occupy it Brazil regarded herself as the logical heir as being the next largest and most populous state on this hemisphere. Moreover, she maintained that such an important question ought not to be solved by special agreement made in private by individual members of the League, all of them Europeans.

Brazil unquestionably expected the other Latin American states to back up her claim. They did not. On the contrary, the majority of their delegates at Geneva sent a request to the Brazilian delegation to recede from its position. They did this in accordance with the principle of the equality of states, of which the Latin American nations have been the strongest possible advocates; they denied the claim of any state to be the leader of America and as such the holder of a permanent seat on the Council. They were ready to support the elimination of permanent Council seats altogether, but, failing that, they merely demanded increased representation on the Council for American members of the League without any special position for any particular member. Their refusal to support Brazil destroyed all her chances of success. The League declined to accede to Brazil’s demand; and Brazil notified the League of her intention to withdraw. Her notice of withdrawal was followed by a reorganization of the Council which increased the representation of Latin American nations from two to three members. The withdrawal of Brazil from the League enhanced the position of Chile, which was elected in the following year to occupy the non-permanent seat formerly occupied by Brazil. Chile had heartily coöperated in the work of the League from its beginning.

The attitude of Argentina to the League has been very different from that of Chile. She has participated but little in its work and has not shown any great amount of interest in its activities. Almost at the beginning of the League’s career the Argentine delegation introduced three resolutions for considera-
tion by the Assembly, directed towards widening the influence and improving the machinery of the League. Admireable in themselves, they were ahead of their time. The first resolution provided that all nations should be invited to join the League, in accordance with the principle of universality. The attitude of the majority of the European nations towards both Germany and Russia was then one of intense antagonism and rendered the adoption of this resolution hopeless. The second resolution maintained that equality among member states should be made real by having all the Council elected every year. The third resolution provided that all states should join the Permanent Court of International Justice and should in addition adhere to the principle of compulsory jurisdiction. Today this suggestion has been to a great extent realized; but in 1920 it was premature. Upon the refusal of the League to accept its proposals, the Argentine delegation withdrew. Although Argentina remained within the League it was not officially represented again at the annual meetings of the Assembly until 1933.

Argentina’s proposals were an evidence of the idealism with which most of the Latin American states viewed the founding of a world organization to maintain peace and develop international justice. Her withdrawal from attendance was no doubt partly due also to the important place occupied by her rival, Brazil, in League affairs. It is noteworthy that in 1928, the year in which Brazil definitively severed all legal connections with the League, Argentina sent an observer to the meeting of the Assembly, and in 1933 resumed full membership in the League and was elected to the Council. This has had repercussions in Latin America, for it is looked upon as lending encouragement to Argentina’s aspirations to hegemony.

The fourth great Latin American state, Mexico, was not invited at the close of the World War to join the League. The Allies had regarded the government and people of that country during the war as pro-German in sympathy and activity. Moreover, when the League came into existence, Mexico was engaged in a bitter controversy with the United States over the oil and land questions and the government of the United States used its influence against Mexico’s receiving an invitation to join. Mexico was afterward (1923) formally invited to join the League, but refused because of what she considered the affront of having been omitted from the list of those originally invited. However, in 1929
Mexico accredited an observer to the League and in 1931 formally joined.

The belief — of which the Argentine proposals were an evidence — that the League would immediately bring about a new world order, was also revealed in the expectation that it would undertake forthwith to revise the evils of existing treaties in accordance with Article XIX of the Covenant. In the very first year of the League’s existence, indeed, Peru and Bolivia brought up for consideration the Tacna-Arica controversy and the question of revising the treaties which had been drafted to settle the problems arising from the War of the Pacific of 1879. But in the first years of the League’s existence the European members of the League were giving all their attention to the pressing problems of war-worn Europe and had no interest in attempting to settle a dispute which was so distant both in time and place. The result was that Peru and Bolivia, disillusioned and irritated, were among the absentees from League assemblies until 1929.

Concerning the relations of the other Latin American states with the League of Nations, particular mention must be made of Cuba and Uruguay. These two small states have been the most faithful of the Latin American countries in their attendance at League meetings and conferences, in their ratification of League conventions, and in their payment of League quotas.

III

The relations of the great majority of the Latin American countries with the League of Nations have been characterized by vacillation ranging all the way from enthusiastic devotion to complete indifference. The reasons are not far to seek. Latin America feels no compelling cause for constant and unremitting vigilance in the affairs of the League. Belgium, Poland, or Jugoslavia hardly dares to absent itself from League meetings, but Argentina, Peru, or Costa Rica feels that it is losing nothing and risking nothing by staying away. Spain withdrew from the League, but soon returned; not so, Brazil. The fact is that most of the questions that have agitated the League have been matters of comparative indifference to Latin America. In the early years of the League’s existence, the questions of Danzig, the Saar, the Greek refugees, might appeal to the sympathies and sense of justice of Latin Americans, but they did not affect their vital
interests. Even in later years when the League’s attention was given to problems of world importance, the interest of the Latin Americans was but mildly aroused. The limitation of armaments may be a matter of vital importance to the peace of the world generally, but it has little direct meaning for the Latin American nations which have insignificant armaments. Wars between Latin American countries would be impossible were the supply of armaments to belligerents cut at the source. The League attempted to bring this about last year, but was unsuccessful. The Latin American critics of the League set this down as a failure.

The lack of compelling reasons for constant attention to the work of the League is made evident in the kind of representatives sent to Geneva from Latin America. The European states, Japan (when a member), and the British Dominions are usually represented by their prime ministers or ministers of foreign affairs. With the exception of Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Uruguay, the Latin American states usually, though not always, have been represented by their ministers at Paris or some other European capital. They were not generally outstanding personages and seldom contributed much to the discussion or solution of important questions. This method of representation has unquestionably been due partly to considerations of expense. The travel expenses of the representatives of most European countries in going to Geneva is negligible, but for delegates from Latin America it is very considerable. The smaller and poorer Latin American states have found their quotas to the League budget a considerable financial burden. That fact has caused them to make an unfavorable comparison between their quotas to the League of Nations and to the Pan American Union. For example, Cuba’s contribution to the League is $47,599 as against $3,927 to the Union. Uruguay’s allotment to the League is $37,021 as against $1,892 to the Union.¹ In consequence, many Latin American members of the League have been in constant arrears of payment and have had frequently to be reminded by Geneva that an international organization requires financial support in the same manner as a national government.

The disposition of most European governments to ratify agreements signed by their representatives at Geneva is in striking contrast to the indifference shown by most of the Latin American governments. The Protocol of Signature of the Perma-

¹ Budgets for 1929.
nent Court of International Justice, in which the Latin American states expressed deep interest, dates back to 1920. Only nine member states have not yet ratified it; five of these are Latin American. The compromise on the question of compulsory jurisdiction for the Court resulting in the adoption of the Optional Clause has also not yet been ratified by seven Latin American states. Twelve Latin American states have as yet ratified none of the eight amendments to the Covenant for which their representatives voted. On the 80 conventions, agreements, and protocols drawn up under League auspices, up to date 1,545 ratifications have been received, of which only 164 are Latin American. The International Labor Office has drawn up 33 conventions which have received a total of 483 ratifications; but only 34 of these are from Latin American states. Thirteen Latin American states have ratified none at all. These delays are sometimes due to differences of opinion between the executive and legislative branches of the government; sometimes a different political party has come into control of the government between the signing of the convention and the proposal for ratification. But far more often the delay is due simply to inertia.

These facts have caused irritation among other members of the League, and the irritation has been strengthened by the great influence exerted by the Latin American bloc in the election of members to the non-permanent Council seats and even to the World Court. During the past decade there has existed a growing tendency towards regionalism in the League and this has strengthened the bloc principle. The members of the British Commonwealth of Nations form one bloc which can be fairly certain to cast seven votes in the Assembly for a measure which it favors, whenever the Irish Free State does not decide to pursue an independent course. France and her allies, Belgium and the Little Entente, form another bloc; and there are still others. But due to its size and cohesive nature, no bloc exerts an influence in elections comparable to the Latin American bloc. It decides in advance, and with little risk of reversal, which countries in Latin America shall be elected to the non-permanent Council seats. But its political maneuvering would probably not have given offense had it not extended to elections to the World Court bench.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the irritation mentioned above lessens the desire of the other member states to have Latin American nations as members of the League. Quite
the contrary. Partly to meet the insistent demand of the Latin American states for greater representation in the personnel of the Secretariat — a demand which has not been very successful — the League has established a separate Latin American bureau within the Secretariat called "Liaison with Latin America." The object is to combat the lethargy that prevails in Latin American countries concerning the League, by diffusing information about the League and its activities. In 1927, the Council of the League authorized a Conference of Health Experts on Infant Mortality to be held in Montevideo, the first international conference to be held on Latin American soil under League auspices. League officials, including the Secretary General, have visited the Latin American countries in recent years with the object of increasing coöperation between the League and their governments. The League has, moreover, always been responsive to requests for technical assistance from Latin American countries. For example, in 1929 it acceded to a request from Bolivia for the assistance of the Health Committee of the League in the reorganization of the sanitary service of the country. At that moment Bolivia had been in arrears on the League budget quota since 1923.

IV

It can hardly be questioned that one of the motives animating some of the Latin American nations in joining the League was, as stated above, the belief that the new organization might act as a counterweight to the United States. In this they have been disappointed. The League has never given up the hope that the United States would some day become a member and it has not desired to sacrifice that possibility in order to support the cause of some small and troublous Caribbean state protesting against some action by the United States. During the League's first years of life the United States viewed with suspicion any appearance that the League was preparing to take a special interest in purely inter-American affairs. It was an unnecessary suspicion, for the League was aware of its weakness and had no intention of courting the ill will of the most powerful nation in the world. On the other hand, the United States made it plain to the Latin American nations that it would oppose any attempt to set up a regional branch of the League of Nations on the American hemisphere. At the Pan American Conference at Santiago in 1923, the suggestion of so good a friend of the United States as Presi-
dent Brum of Uruguay, looking towards establishing an American League of Nations within the world League of Nations, was never brought up for consideration because of the opposition of the United States.

As the war receded into the background, the United States became more aware of its new place of power in world affairs. The belief began to weaken that the best way to keep Europe from interfering in the international politics of the Americas was for the United States to refuse to participate in the solution of European political problems. The United States became convinced that it had much to gain through cooperation with the League. Hence, the latent opposition to the League’s taking an active interest in Latin American affairs gradually waned in the United States. This was made evident when the dispute between Paraguay and Bolivia about the Chaco broke out in 1928. The Council of the League called the attention of those two countries to their commitments under the Covenant. On the very day on which the cablegram from Geneva was sent to Bolivia and Paraguay, the International Conference of American States on Conciliation and Arbitration convened at Washington. All American states save Argentina were represented and the Argentine representative soon after took his seat. Acting in the traditional Pan American way of solving purely American problems by means of American agencies, the Conference appointed a committee to investigate the facts in the Chaco dispute and to try to reconcile the two disputants. No suggestion was made that the task should be delegated to the League of Nations. But at the same time no criticism of the League was made for the action it had taken in the dispute. On the contrary, appreciation was expressed in all countries, including the United States.

Every year saw the participation of the United States in League activities more intimate and its hesitancy to acquiesce in the League’s becoming directly and actively interested in the affairs of the American hemisphere less evident. Hence, when the Leticia dispute between Peru and Colombia broke out in 1932 the United States was entirely content to have the League intervene to try to prevent a conflict of arms. A League Commission, which has an American member, is now at Rio Janeiro working on the problem. Another League Commission is now at Montevideo securing information about the Chaco dispute before visiting Asuncion and La Paz. The League will spare no effort to
obtain some measure of success in the Chaco and Leticia disputes, for its future influence in South America is at stake. Its prestige received a blow as a result of the outcome of the Sino-Japanese affair of 1931–1932. The Latin American states have been the constant upholders of the rights of weak nations, and many Latin Americans regarded the incident as evidencing the League’s impotence where a Great Power is in dispute with a weaker nation. Moreover, scepticism as to the League’s influence has been recently increased by the withdrawal of Japan and Germany and the attacks of the Italian press.

As a result of the increasing disinclination to accept American leadership in international affairs, and of the growing scepticism regarding the power of the League to settle international disputes, the South American states are now looking to themselves for the settlement of their continent’s problems. In this movement Argentina has been particularly active. Argentina is very proud of her remarkable progress during the past generation. She regards the leadership of Latin America as naturally falling to her, and sees herself as the protagonist of Latin America versus the United States. This attitude is not shared by the people of other Latin American states. In fact, nothing could be more mistaken than the belief that because a latent distrust of the United States exists in most of the Latin American countries it has led to the building up of anything like a unified bloc against the United States. Too many divisive influences exist. Moreover, the dislike of the United States held by many people in Argentina is paralleled by the dislike of Argentina held by many people in other countries of Latin America. They resent any attitude of superiority upon its part as much as they do any attitude of tutelage upon our part. Nevertheless, the recent visit of President Justo of Argentina to President Vargas of Brazil would seem to indicate that the Argentine foreign office believes it possible to organize the countries of the southern half of South America into a group under its leadership, for the consideration and solution of questions of mutual interest to them.

If such a movement succeeded the result would be a further dilution of Pan Americanism. That system is now founded largely upon sentiment — a weak reed in international affairs. President Roosevelt’s statement that the American delegation to the Pan American Conference at Montevideo was not to discuss tariff or monetary problems, in which some of the most influential Latin
American states are vitally interested, was a great disappointment. In the background at any Conference, too, whether or not they are smothered in the public sessions, must be several questions which cannot avoid causing bitter feeling — such as the Chaco and Leticia disputes, and the two billion dollars of debts owed by the Latin American governments to American citizens and upon which those governments have been compelled to default because of the economic depression. These handicaps on Pan Americanism might, however, be overcome if the United States were to make substantial concessions in the political sphere of the sort much desired by the whole of Latin America. This would be particularly true were the United States to propose that the common interest of all the American peoples in the Monroe Doctrine be given voice. That would require, first, a united statement that no non-American state shall under any condition gain territory in the American hemisphere or secure control of any government in the American hemisphere; second, that no American state shall secure territory within the sovereignty of another American state, even as a base for military or naval operation; and third, that each American state shall have the right to take measures to secure the observance of these provisions. Moreover, since the Latin American states are placing more and more emphasis upon the doctrine of sovereignty, if the United States felt able to state its willingness to renounce the Platt Amendment as soon as normal conditions are restored in Cuba, that declaration would greatly increase the friendly feeling which already has been created by the fact of our having avoided armed intervention during the present crisis. It is by such substantial measures that the Latin American countries expect President Roosevelt’s policy of the “good neighbor” to be realized. Even as it is, however, the relations of the United States with the Latin American countries are upon a happier foundation than for many years past. The official attitude of the United States to the League of Nations is at present one of cordial and helpful cooperation. It is obvious that there is no ground for antagonism between Pan Americanism as the political principle of the western hemisphere and active cooperation with the League of Nations by all states of that hemisphere.