

Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long. "Soft Balancing in the Americas: Latin American Opposition to U.S. Intervention, 1898-1936." *International Security* 40:1 (Summer 2015): 120-156. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00212.

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Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long argue that Latin American foreign policies, particularly those of Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico, constitute a case of ‘soft balancing’ against the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rather than engaging in issue-specific contestation or bilateral negotiations with Washington, Latin American leaders and diplomats focused on building regional institutions and shaping norms in favor of nonviolent dispute resolution and respect for state sovereignty. The named foreign policy doctrines of Argentine jurist and Foreign Minister Luis María Drago, Argentine diplomat Carlos Calvo, and Mexican Foreign Minister Genaro Estrada not only anchored the arguments of international lawyers and the foreign policies of their countries, but also circumscribed, constrained, and influenced U.S. foreign policy in the Americas. Ultimately, the authors argue, Latin American statecraft generated the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration’s Good Neighbor Policy, a commitment to non-intervention that reversed more than three decades of North American military practice in the circum-Caribbean (135, 152).

This is an important article. It connects Latin American cases and International Relations theory, and it draws on multinational archival research and addresses contemporary debates in security studies. It also offers a rigorous exploration of hemispheric affairs before the Cold War, an era often overlooked in political science and security studies (though not by diplomatic historians), pointing out the operational limits of gunboat diplomacy and imperialism even in their heyday. One of the most valuable contributions of the article is the curation of private communications between Latin American statesmen at key moments in the evolution of the hemispheric system, such as before the 1936 conference in Buenos Aires. This provides a clear picture of Latin American leaders’ values and goals, and of the degree of regional solidarity and agenda-setting around shared normative principles. Like the authors’ other work, it advances one of the central debates in

contemporary inter-American relations scholarship: Latin American agency versus North American hegemony as the baseline concept of power in the Western hemisphere.¹ It is required reading on my graduate syllabus on Latin American International Relations.

However, I am not fully persuaded that what Latin American leaders were doing qualifies as soft balancing, or that their diplomacy effectively influenced the Franklin Roosevelt administration. Four points in particular should merit further research and debate.

First, rather than ‘soft balancing’ collectively against a North American threat, Latin American countries’ strategies and ambitions varied with respect to the United States and to one another. The authors note this variation, but rather than testing a causal explanation of Latin American foreign policy against alternatives, they are primarily engaged in descriptive claims that Latin American behavior “closely resembles descriptions” of soft balancing in order to “refine the concept” (121-123, cf. 133-134). Brazil seems to have been bandwagoning with Washington, if anything (138). And Argentine and Mexican pressures for nonintervention are compatible with ambition for regional leadership (as is Brazil’s strategy), and in Mexico’s case, with national security rather than hemispheric norms. Sumner Welles, a leading architect of the Good Neighbor policy in Roosevelt’s State Department, argued that prior to the 1936 hemispheric conference, Argentina was looking out for itself: the Argentines primarily wanted to ensure that the meeting would be held in Buenos Aires, they opposed the plan for collective security that most of the region was prepared to endorse, and Argentine Foreign Minister Carlos Saavedra Lamas was emphatic about “Argentine supremacy” and held a “contemptuous disregard” for the smaller states.²

Second, the regional balancing story appears to contradict the emphasis on bilateral policy reciprocity as the cornerstone of the Good Neighbor era presented in Bryce Wood’s classic study (not cited by the authors).³ Wood observes that statesmen at the time resisted presenting their policies (particularly U.S. nonintervention and Latin American respect for the interests of North American corporations) in terms of tit-for-tat bargaining (335), which would make Long and Friedman’s argument hard to falsify. (The authors note, 124, 128, that the bargaining hypothesis is an important alternative reading of apparent soft balancing behavior elsewhere in security studies.) Standing on principle and law can itself be a bargaining tactic. To assess the impact of normative persuasion, we need to learn more about the material concessions that Latin American leaders might have offered the United States, particularly over the management of resource nationalization. Sumner Welles did endorse Mexico’s Estrada Doctrine (diplomatic recognition of de facto governments rather than interfering in domestic affairs) in his memoirs, but he also praised Mexican presidents (and

¹ Joseph Tulchin, *Latin America in International Politics: Challenging U.S. Hegemony* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2016); Andrew Tillman and Juan Pablo Scarfi, eds., *Cooperation and Hegemony in U.S.-Latin American Relations: Revisiting the Western Hemisphere Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Tom Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States: Asymmetry and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Max Paul Friedman, *Rethinking Anti-Americanism: The History of an Exceptional Concept in American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 4; cf. Christopher Darnton, “After Decentering: The Politics of Agency and Hegemony in Hemispheric Relations,” (review article), *Latin American Research Review* 48:3 (2013): 231-239.

² Sumner Welles, *The Time For Decision*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 204-206.

³ Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 7, 327, 330.

Roosevelt) for their “sincerely eager” work “to find a fair solution” for a number of issue-disputes involving economic resources.⁴ (Similarly, if the Roosevelt administration’s nonintervention was part of a restrained exercise of hegemony in order to gain Latin American support for its regional and global agenda, then this too seems compatible with a bargaining framework.⁵)

Third, if Latin American agency did change minds in Washington, credit might be due to smaller rather than larger countries, and not to the lawyers, but to the insurgents. The U.S. turned to Good Neighborliness after protracted occupations in Nicaragua and elsewhere proved increasingly costly, and committed itself to nonintervention as the Great Depression made such costs more difficult to bear and as U.S. security concerns escalated outside the Americas. The learning and coercive bargaining processes of war, rather than a persuasive mechanism of soft balancing, may be at work in U.S. policy change. The authors briefly note this line of argument and appropriately cite Alan McPherson’s work,⁶ claiming that this was “another decisive element” that “contributed importantly” to U.S. shifts away from interventionism (147-148). However, this downplays, by incorporation, a plausible alternative argument that could render spurious much of the Latin American diplomatic lobbying of the time. (Not for nothing does Bryce Wood spend a hundred pages on Nicaragua and Cuba, sites of U.S. occupation, before turning to the origins of the Good Neighbor policy. And Sumner Welles calls nonintervention in Cuba during the escalating violence of 1933, when he was U.S. Ambassador before becoming Assistant Secretary of State, the “first major application” of the policy.⁷)

Finally, the article’s periodization may overstate both U.S. noninterventionism and Latin American influence. The authors correctly note that Latin American resistance to U.S. hegemony and interventionism long predated the Spanish-American War (135-136, 137 fn. 55; 139; timeline on 155) and that it failed to persuade the Theodore Roosevelt administration (140, 143). For four decades, the United States deployed gunboats and marines despite Latin American diplomatic protests. U.S. policy changed belatedly, but relatively swiftly, between President-elect Herbert Hoover’s tour of Latin America in 1928 and Roosevelt’s inauguration in 1933. (Whether the main lines of the Good Neighbor policy are attributable to Hoover or Roosevelt, and whether they pre-date the 1929 onset of the Depression, is an open debate.⁸) A narrower case study focused on this policy change would perhaps overstate the impact of economic conditions and political violence at the end of the 1920s; however, tracing the story back several decades runs the opposite risk, of minimizing these conditions and overstating an eventual U.S. policy shift as the “culmination of several decades of diplomatic and legal activism” on the part of Latin America (135). Similarly, does 1936 represent the conversion of the United States to regional ideals of diplomatic recognition and non-interference, or a

⁴ Welles, *Time For Decision*, 199, 203.

⁵ On the virtues of ‘strategic restraint,’ see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶ See, for example, Alan McPherson, *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ Welles, *Time for Decision*, 193.

⁸ Wood, *Making*, 133, even suggests policy learning by the Calvin Coolidge administration beginning in 1927; contrast Welles’s condemnation of Coolidge’s Latin America policy (*Time for Decision*, 187-190).

brief respite (and perhaps not ultimately a normative one) before U.S. enmeshment in global conflicts renewed U.S. intervention in Latin America (as the authors recognize, 152-153)?

Agency arguments are tricky to prove, and easy to overstate, when the narrative about middle powers shifts from internal autonomy to external influence. A gulf separates the propositions that Calvo and colleagues attempted to restrain the United States from using force, and that such diplomacy altered U.S. foreign policy.⁹ Process tracing can bridge this divide, but some core assertions (e.g. 147-148 that Hoover “was the first US president to accept the Argentine doctrines of Calvo and Drago,” and that Roosevelt “ordered his diplomats in Latin America to follow the principle of the Mexican Estrada Doctrine”) stop short of direct evidence on U.S. leaders’ adoption of Latin American ideas. The more limited version of agency arguments is now practically a consensus in the field of inter-American relations. To their credit, in this article Friedman and Long are hunting larger but more elusive game.

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⁹ This is not an unsympathetic critique. Cf. Christopher Darnton, “Asymmetry and Agenda-Setting in US-Latin American Relations: Rethinking the Origins of the Alliance for Progress,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 55-92.