

HENRY CLAY AND LATIN AMERICA, 1813-1829
SHAPING A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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“My beau ideal of a statesman, the man for whom I fought all my humble life”.

A. Lincoln

“All America, Columbia, and myself, owe your Excellency our purest gratitude for the incomparable services you have rendered to us, by sustaining our course with sublime enthusiasm”.

S. Bolivar

In 1927, on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Henry Clay’s birth, the leading diplomats of the twenty Latin American nations met to pay homage to their most ardent champion, and to acknowledge his role as a passionate advocate of Pan-American Union. That he was a friend worth having, can never be doubted. His charm and intensity were fired by love of liberty and the cause of his country. America, for him, was a beacon of republican virtue with a mandate for moral leadership transcending mere money grubbing. She stood shoulder to shoulder with her fellow republics of the New World in a shared devotion to an unique inheritance.

Clay’s tremendous capacity for leadership was recognized in 1957, when he was chosen the preeminent senator, among all who served in the United States Senate. As Speaker of the House and Secretary of State, he had many opportunities to shape America’s policy toward the emerging nations of Latin America. In a day when public debate was an engrossing spectacle, followed closely by the country in every newspaper, Henry Clay dominated the field. He captivated America’s imagination with the cause of Latin American liberty, and helped convince the nation that the struggle was the great event of the era.

When John Quincy Adams named Clay Secretary of State, he had the opportunity to lay the foundations for our relations with the newly independent countries of the region. His course wasn’t always successful, or free of controversy. Mexico was insulted by his clumsy efforts to acquire Texas, and relations

with that nation began a descent which ultimately led to war. Cuba became the focus of complex objectives involving America, Britain, France, Mexico, and Colombia; and remained for fifty years under martial law as the price of Spanish recognition of Latin American independence, and to insure white supremacy. Attempts to control Bolivar's grandiose designs and dictatorial tendencies compromised a future president of the United States and raised the specter of North American meddling in the internal affairs of Colombia. However, even these failures helped establish a logical hierarchy of American vital interests in which Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Central America constituted a region of critical concern for the United States.

His great successes were in the realm of human spirit and vision. Despite a jealous political storm of shortsighted opposition, the United States sent delegates to attend Bolivar's great congress at Panama. Although they arrived too late to participate, they signaled North America's and Clay's desire to participate in a continental community of nations. Britain was not allowed to pose, unchallenged, as the sole friend of Latin America. The canal that he envisioned reaching across the land bridge of Central America was made a little easier by participation with our neighbors in a effort to forge a New World alternative. Long before Franklin Roosevelt thought to be a "good neighbor", Henry Clay had coined the phrase and sought to build a relationship based on trust and shared values.

The saga of Clay's dedication to the cause of Latin America has been too long ignored. He stands with James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, and is the most important member of that great triumvirate, who collectively shaped the course of our relations with Latin America during the formative years. Only Clay, of the three, never wavered and never doubted the simple justice of Latin American freedom. His eloquence forced America and her timorous politicians to make a lasting commitment to the great ideal of Latin American independence.

His passion sometimes had negative consequences for our hemispheric relations. During Clay's administration of the State Department, Bolivar increasingly became hostile to our objectives in Latin America. Adams and Clay were ever more concerned about Bolivar's growing dictatorial tendencies, and policies which conflicted and clashed with American interests. These tendencies were apparent in the maneuvering surrounding the 1826 congress at Panama.

Even Clay's darkside tended to increase the importance of our southern neighbors. The region has never been the main focus of American scholarship, and our early relations with Latin American are even more neglected. Like Clay, they have attracted limited interest, confined to a few popular themes. Those themes include the Spanish-American revolutions, our impact on those revolu-

tions, Pan-Americanism, and the Monroe Doctrine. Clay was intimately involved in all of those continental developments.

Dexter Perkins' seminal volume, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine*, was dedicated to one of those great themes. Only the first two chapters are of value in defining Clay's contribution to our Latin American diplomacy. His importance is, nevertheless, underscored by the author's use of a quotation from a famous 1818 speech by Henry Clay to open the book. That speech was a clarion call to recognize and support Latin American independence.

The development of an idea, Pan-Americanism, was the focus of the great Latin Americanist, Joseph Byrne Lockey. His classic 1920 study, *Pan-Americanism: Its Beginnings*, traces the evolution of the concept to about 1830. Pan-Americanism is inherently diplomatic in nature, because it is essentially a rationale for the Western Hemisphere nations to act as a peaceful community of like-minded, democratic societies. Henry Clay's work as a diplomat, rather than as a propagandist, is emphasized by the author.

Our revolution and France's brought the Enlightenment into sharper focus for Spanish Americans and focused their attention on the United States and France. The American paradigm had more practical appeal than the French model, and as less threatening and more enduring. The very existence of the United States excited Latin imaginations. Bolivar admired Washington and thought the United States a "land of freedom and home of civic virtue". These factors made Clay's influence on American public opinion critical for Latin revolutionaries. They also increased the value placed on United States recognition. Agents of men like Bolivar coordinated their activities in North America with Clay.

Clay's relationship with Latin America during the period of this study can be conveniently divided into two quite different segments. The first, starting in 1813 and ending on his assumption of the office of Secretary of State in 1825, centers on his activity as a shaper and molder of American public opinion in support of Latin American freedom. Merrill D. Peterson, a recent Clay biographer, characterized it "as the most gallant chapter of the statesman's life". In the process, Clay educated himself as well as the American public. He was the most important and vocal North American political leader in the struggle to wrest recognition for the Latin American republics.

The first part of Clay's connection with Latin America is the least controversial, although his contemporaries, including Madison, Monroe, and John Quincy Adams, sometimes ascribed base or selfish motives to his actions. While political objectives may well have partially motivated his long-standing support

of Latin American independence and recognition, his emotional, Jeffersonian love of liberty and his firm attachment to democratic institutions are almost certainly the main reasons for his strong support. Clay's romantic and ardent nature was inflamed by the spirit of the times, when the messianic appeal of republican virtue stalked the land. Fervor and conviction, spontaneously demonstrated, were the natural hallmarks of a temperament careless of money, buoyed by demonstrated warmth and compassion.

Latin American agents and lobbyists desperately sought North American and British support for their cause. In the beginning, North Americans knew little of the long closed and guarded societies of Spanish America. It was necessary not only to seek the favor of influential people, but also to educate and inform the public. Clay's speeches, spread throughout the nation by constant reprinting in the newspapers, were the chief catalysts in creating a favorable climate for recognition. Only success on the battlefield was required to bring the hardheaded Monroe and the realistic John Quincy Adams around to something approximating Clay's position.

As lobbyists always do, the Latin American leaders sought to manipulate and control Clay. They were certainly never able to accomplish that task successfully, because Clay was a man of integrity and character. However, his imperfect and makeshift education left him vulnerable to sophisticated manipulation of the facts and his prejudices. Clay and many Latin American revolutionaries were also united by the, then powerful, bonds of Masonry. This provided access and lent credibility to the appeals of the revolutionaries. Clay, like most Kentuckians, had absolutely no sympathy for Spain, which made him even more susceptible to the siren song of her enemies.

When the United States recognized Latin American independence in 1822, Bolivar had defeated the Spanish at Carabobo and won Venezuela, and Sucre was about to win Pichincha and Ecuador. Argentina and Chile were free, and San Martin had invaded the last real bastion of Spanish power in South America, Peru. It seemed safe and proper for men of the head to join a man of the heart. Monroe and his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, had made the long journey from neutrality to recognition; they had joined Clay in support of our sister republics in the face of a hostile and perilous world.

Only a juxtaposition of Spanish American revolutionary successes with the American political scene, permits a proper appreciation of the development of North American public policy as it relates to Latin America. Clay's freedom from responsibility for the administration's program had permitted him unlimited opportunity to pursue his own program for Latin America without thought to the

practical consequences. He, and the United States, were equally free of the difficulty of dealing on even terms with their neighbors to the south. The Latin American nations were mere supplicants for United States support, until they had fully established their independence. In 1822 it appeared that true independence would soon be completely secured on the battlefield, and our relations had yet to be clouded by more complex, intractable problems.

With American recognition of Latin American independence appearing more likely in 1821, Clay moved to repair relations between himself and the administration. Robert Remini, the latest Clay biographer, notes Clay's hope, expressed to John Quincy Adams, Monroe's Secretary of State, that his differences with the administration's Latin American policy would soon be over and his regret over past confrontations on the subject. The author says, "the cautions Adams eyed his visitor carefully". These convenient insights of Remini are supported by the subsequent rapprochement of the parties, and Clay's comments to Adams on the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine.

Monroe's famous policy statement, included in his December, 1823 "State of the Union" address, made a full reconciliation between Adams and Clay even more likely. It marked the transition to a new phase of United States/Latin American relations, and to a new role for Henry Clay. He would soon embark, as Secretary of State, on a career requiring unusual responsibility, and plagued with increasing complexity. It was to be a time of new beginnings, false starts, political obstructionism, potentially dangerous reaction, and foundation building.

Clay did not abandon his emotional commitment to our free institutions upon his accession to high office and his lifelong love of liberty caused new complications in our relations with Latin America. He attempted to support democratic forces when Bolivar moved toward dictatorship and monarchy. William Henry Harison's activities in that regard, as well as those of our representatives in Peru and Mexico, are documented by the literature. Activism and commitment to the North American governmental system marked his approach to Latin America, and both were permitted far wider scope in his new office. His ideological world-view strained relations with Latin America, and encouraged an effort to force compliance with our model.

Bolivar's ground breaking congress at Panama provided an early, and far better, opportunity for a successful application of Clay's ardor and devotion to the principles of democracy and good relations. Although the Jacksonian enemies of the administration sought to use the issue of our participation to wound Adams and Clay, the administration never wavered in its commitment to active participation in the hemispheric community. This historic debate framed a precedent

setting division between the forces of isolation and nativism, and those who favored an enthusiastic involvement in the world. Clay's instructions to his representatives to the Panama Congress laid down a valuable foundation for future generations of North American diplomats, with their clear exposition of goals and principles. The instructions, and the administration effort itself, made North American inclusion in the emerging Pan-American community far more likely.

Mary Hargreaves, author of the leading study of the presidency of John Quincy Adams, and Arthur Preston Whitaker, expert of Latin American independence, both cited the Central American Federation treaty as an important point of departure for United States diplomacy. While Central America was small and soon dissolved as an entity, the region was to be of critical concern for our country. The treaty of 1825 also was the first to provide for complete reciprocity, thereby establishing a valuable model for all commercial treaties. Central America was selected as a candidate for a special relationship as a natural consequence of our successful diplomacy, and in recognition of Clay's interest in a canal across the isthmus.

The emergence of an independent Latin America, coincident with Clay's tenure as Secretary of State, gave him other unparalleled opportunities to structure our commercial relations with the new nations. North America's and Clay's great prestige as champions of liberty and exemplars of republican virtue made the task easier and more successful, than would otherwise have been the case. He had long argued that one of the reasons for supporting Latin American independence was the region's great potential as a trading partner. Given his predilection for the development of capital and commercial interests, this long held belief in the economic potential of Latin America could hardly fail to encourage a strong and concerted effort to forge trading ties.

In addition to an emphasis on political and economic participation in the hemisphere, Clay strongly supported the recently proclaimed Monroe Doctrine despite Jacksonian opposition. He, and the majority of North America's political leaders, believed that European colonies in the New World constituted a natural threat to the existence of the United States. Clay could never forget that the young United States was a small republic facing hostile Old World monarchs, harboring designs on its territory or interests. European involvement in the New World would have encouraged conflict between the great nations of Europe and the United States.

Latin America learned that the Monroe Doctrine was neither automatic, nor bilateral. Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires had each sought to

ascertain, before Adams left office, how protective and meaningful the great declaration actually was. In August, 1824, Adams responded to the first such inquiry by noting the constitutional necessity for congressional approval of any presidential initiative in support of the doctrine. However, soon after Clay assumed his new position as Secretary of State, the administration launched a concerted diplomatic effort to secure European recognition of Latin American independence. The clear signal was that Latin America could count on peaceful support for its independence, but anything further would depend entirely on the circumstances at the time, and on our perception of North American vital interests.

In a sense; Cuba was the point where all these currents and crosscurrents of conviction came together and collided with the even stronger force of Clay's North American nationalism and ardent support for expansionism, prejudices shared by Adams. The island's future was also influenced by North American fear of the bloody example of revolutionary Haiti, and the danger it represented for both Cuba and the slaveholding region of the United States. Clay determined that Cuba could not successfully handle independence, and North American acquiescence in continued Spanish control could be used as an inducement to secure recognition of Latin American independence from Spain. North America was also unwilling to tolerate any change of status, other than a viable independence or cession to the United States. Colombian and Mexican threats to invade Cuba to aid their fellow Spanish Americans and to secure the independence of Latin America alarmed Clay, but there is evidence that Bolivar, at least, was only bluffing.

Clay and Adams were equally unwilling to see the island in the hands of a stronger European power. Conflict and uncertainty would enhance that possibility, so Clay moved to resolve the problem. In April, 1825, he publically stated his desire that Cuba remain dependent on Spain. Finally, in December of that year, with the knowledge that Canning of Britain was opposed to the Colombian/Mexican project, Clay asked both Colombia and Mexico to suspend their invasion plans. Cuba's fate was sealed for seventy years, in much the same fashion that John Kennedy's accommodation of Castro's position preserved the status quo. The colony developed a major sugar industry during the period and the population of the island changed with the importation of large numbers of Black slaves, to work in the burgeoning sugar industry.

It was a day of new beginnings, in the sense that the recently emergent nations of Latin America began to realize that their interests and ours were certain to conflict in some key areas. Cuba was a symbol of those inevitable clashes of interest. Clay's commitment to North American growth in Texas and Cuba was

antithetical to the vital concerns of the Spanish-speaking countries, and indirect conflict with his own dedication to the cause of their freedom and integrity. Equally, his resentment of Bolivar's perceived abandonment of American republican principles in favor of authoritarian rule, and his consequent meddling in Colombian internal affairs, foreshadowed future United States policies and represented another surrender to his nationalistic biases.

There is general agreement that Clay's role in supporting the cause of Latin American independence, alone, affords him a commanding position in our relations with Latin America. It was the spontaneous act of a generous spirit unfettered by conflicting claims on his loyalties. In arguing for independence, he was acting in support of North America's interest, his own convictions, and the spirit of the times. His skills as an orator, and leader of public opinion, admirably prepared him for the role of chief propagandist for the cause of Latin American independence.

His support of "good neighbor" policies, Pan-Americanism, the Monroe Doctrine, and close relations with Latin America also received generally favorable comment. Clay really cared about the New World, and his actions reflected that concern. He envisioned a community of nations with kindred institutions under the benign leadership of the United States, free of corrupt European influences. Perhaps, his lack of formal training in Latin American history and culture made it easier for him to aim at the creation of a somewhat utopian world, and ignore his own conflicting objectives. In any event, he played a major role in creating the necessary climate and examples upon which a viable continental polity was constructed.

Cuba, Texas, and Clay's intervention in the new nations' internal affairs are at best ambiguous in their consequences for the United States and Latin America. Clay was buffeted by the conflicting claims of nationalism and his commitment to hemispheric solidarity. Problems for future North American diplomats were created or anticipated, but in the case of Cuba and Texas the political geography of those two regions was irrevocably changed from what it might have been.

Any evaluation of Clay's impact on Latin America, whether favorable or unfavorable, has to accord him credit for playing a major part in shaping North America's relations with the region. He was a man that cast a giant shadow, and even his mistakes were fateful. This was due only partially to the timeliness of his contributions. His unique position in North American politics, and his willingness to speak out, were significant elements in shaping United States relations with Latin American. Finally, Adams and Clay attached the highest priority to

those Latin American relations, an almost unparalleled circumstance in North America's history. They forced the United States to look south and forge links of trade, influence, common institutions, and a shared commitment to the Western Hemisphere.

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