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# Latin America, the Good Neighbor, and the Global Second World War[1]

# América Latina, o Bom Vizinho e a Segunda Guerra Mundial Global

# América Latina, el Buen Vecino y la Segunda Guerra Mundial Global

Andrew Buchanan[2]
Ruth Lawlor[3]

**Abstract**: This lecture, presented to the ground-breaking conference on "The Good Neighbor Policy in Time of War" in Rio de Janeiro, seeks to locate the Good Neighbor Policy—and U.S. relations with Latin America more broadly—in the context of the global crisis produced by the Great Depression of the 1930s and the world war that followed. We argue that the Good Neighbor is best understood as a *war* policy, designed first to advance the construction of a U.S.-led autarkic bloc in the Americas—in parallel to other autarkic-imperial projects developed during the 1930s—and then to leverage hemispheric hegemony to support the creation of Washington's global predominance after 1945. From this point of view, we conclude that rather than being marginal to historical accounts of the world war—or even absent entirely—Latin America should be placed at the center of the story, functioning both as a 'springboard' to the U.S. victory and as the indispensable regional bedrock of Washington's coming global hegemony..
**Keywords:** good neighbor policy; great depression; second world war; U.S. global hegemony; economic and military agreements; military bases.

**Resumo**: Esta conferência, apresentada no Simpósio inovador "A Política da Boa Vizinhança em Tempos de Guerra" no Rio de Janeiro, busca situar a Política da Boa Vizinhança — e as relações dos EUA com a América Latina de forma mais ampla — no contexto da crise global produzida pela Grande Depressão da década de 1930 e pela guerra mundial que se seguiu. Argumentamos que o Bom Vizinho é melhor compreendido como uma política de guerra, projetada primeiro para promover a construção de um bloco autárquico liderado pelos Estados Unidos nas Américas — em paralelo a outros projetos aurtárquico-imperiais desenvolvidos durante a década de 1930 — e então para alavancar a hegemonia hemisférica no apoio

à criação do predomínio global de Washington após 1945. Deste ponto de vista, concluímos que, em vez de ser marginal aos relatos históricos da guerra mundial — ou mesmo ausente completamente — a América Latina deveria ser colocada no centro da história, funcionando tanto como um "trampolim" para a vitória dos EUA quanto como o alicerce regional indispensável da vindoura hegemonia global de Washington. **Palavras-chave**: política de boa vizinhança; grande depressão; segunda guerra mundial; hegemonia global dos EUA; acordos econômicos e militares; bases militares.

I am sure that some of you have been wondering what two non-Lusophones from the United States have been doing at this conference over the past three days. So: a few words of introduction. We are historians of the global Second World War, and over the past four years we have worked with a group of scholars around the world—from Brazil and India to Italy and the Netherlands—to write the wartime histories of different regions of the world from a global perspective (Buchanan, 2019; Buchanan, 2023; Buchanan; Lawlor, 2025). That means thinking about how particular regions were shaped by broader world events and, in turn, how regional and sub-continental developments combined to constitute the global. Together, this group has collectively authored a new collection of essays, entitled *The Greater Second World War: Global Perspectives*, which will be published by Cornell University Press in April 2025.

Over the course of the discussions on this book project, we have become convinced that more work needs to be done to theorize the connection between regional and global histories, especially with regard to major regions of the world that are all too often overlooked in the grand narratives that are the mainstay of most global histories. Moreover, we realized that while Latin America is largely or entirely neglected in almost all the general histories of the Second World War, it is impossible to understand the global history of World War II without making events in this part of the Western Hemisphere central to the story.[4] It was in this context that we first met Alexandre Fortes—one of the organizers of this conference—and invited him to contribute a chapter on Latin America, and it is through this connection that we have ended up here. We have come to Rio to learn from you, to deepen our own understanding of wartime developments in Latin America, and to share our thoughts on how events here might be seen as critical to the construction of a broader and genuinely global history of World War II.

**The Great Depression and the Partition of the World**

The Greater Second World War was set in motion by the seismic events of the October 1929 Wall Street Crash. Over the following years, the effects of this melt-down in the nerve-center of the global financial system rippled out across the

world via the web of war debts, loans, and reparations that had bound together the victors, the vanquished, and their colonies and dependencies since the 1919 Versailles settlement at the end of World War I. As the world market shattered in the early 1930s—signaled by the collapse of the gold standard—the globe was increasingly partitioned into a series of separate autarkic-imperial blocs, each led by one of the major imperial powers: Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States. In their own autarkic regions, the great powers aimed to exercise unchallenged economic predominance, excluding their rivals and securing control of resources—including raw materials and human labor-power—and markets. Since moves to augment the scope of one autarkic bloc inevitably undermined the power of a rival, the economic partition of the world set in motion a series of zero-sum conflicts between the great powers that necessarily led them toward a second great war.

The process of winding into a second global conflict began with a series of regional crises, starting with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Yet the Mukden Incident was not simply the spark that lit the fuse of global war, as is sometimes asserted. Instead, it signified the first act of military expansion made in response to the global economic crisis, and it modelled a new form of territorially contiguous empire-building that posed a challenge both to the older imperial powers and their blue-water empires ruled from London, Paris, and The Hague and to the rising power of the United States (Hedinger, 2017). In a sign of what was to come, the onset of expansionist war in East Asia coincided with British efforts to consolidate its own autarkic bloc, registered in waning hegemon's departure from the gold standard and its turn to imperial protectionism at the Ottawa conference in 1932. These blows to an integrated global economy were followed in 1933 by two parallel phenomena: the rise to power in Germany of the Nazi Party with its commitment to dominating the Eurasian heartland through violent expansion, and the accession of President Franklin D. Roosevelt with his own ambition to create an autarkic sphere in the Western Hemisphere. The creation of such a sphere, we will argue, was the true purpose of the Good Neighbor Policy. Meanwhile, as the worldwide retreat from the fragile stability of the 1920s accelerated, Fascist Italy launched its

own bid to expand its colonial empire on the shores of the Mediterranean and in the Horn of Africa with its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

Each of these developments unfolded within a world order structured by long-term contradictions in global capitalism and, in particular, by the inevitable tensions between the inherently expansionist dynamic of capital and the spatial constraints placed upon it by the nation-state, the archetypal form of state-level political organization under capitalism (Trotsky, 2019, p. 247-248). The scale of the crisis revealed the tendency of capitalism to develop the world unevenly, leaving the rulers of late-industrializing countries without colonial hinterlands of their own and fearful for their national prosperity in the context of the limits imposed upon their expansionist ambitions by the colonial boundaries of the already-existing imperial powers, as well as by the rising power of the United States, which had itself emerged as a world-historical force after World War I. Indeed, historian Sarah Paine has recently argued that Tokyo's decision to drive into Manchuria in 1931 was triggered by the passing of the Smoot-Hawley Act in 1930. This protectionist legislation, adopted by Washington at the start of the depression, set tariffs at historic heights, thus disrupting Japan's exports to the United States just as it was struggling to recover from the initial effects of the depression (Paine, 2012, p. 22). From Tokyo's perspective, new markets were needed to stave off total economic collapse and, with access to the United States blocked, they were seen to lie in the conquest and industrialization of Manchuria and in its autarkic integration into the Japanese economy. This, Tokyo hoped, would revive the country's manufacturing base and create a large "internal" market free from the dislocations of the global economy. Nazi Germany's continental expansion in Europe and later in the Soviet Union similarly framed the country as a nation unjustly oppressed by the forces of global finance—an antisemitic trope, to be sure, and one aimed not only at British and French imperialism but also at the United States. Washington's own rise, of course, had been facilitated by its domination of a vast, contiguous area of settlement and investment in the U.S. West.

What transformed these various expansionist responses to the Great

Depression and the local wars they generated into a truly global conflict was the intervention of the United States, beginning in December 1941. The United States was the only country with both the capacity and the ambition to fight a two-front war on such a massive scale. During the late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration had commissioned a series of studies by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) to determine whether the United States could still prosper if Nazi expansionism came to dominate what the imperialist geopolitician Halford Mackinder had called the "world island" of Afro-Eurasia (Ekbladh, 2011/2012). At first CFR strategists argued that the creation of what they called a "quarter sphere"—a zone of economic integration and military defense stretching from Canada to Brazil—would be sufficient. By October 1940, however, neither the quarter sphere nor the Western Hemisphere as a whole were considered capable of meeting the economic needs of the United States, and CFR strategists instead delivered plans for U.S. domination of what they termed the "Grand Area," in essence a blueprint for American leadership of a newly-reintegrated world economic system (Wertheim, 2020, p. 47-79).

With hindsight, the emergence of a US-led world order after World War II can appear inevitable. Our work, however, rejects this teleological impression and emphasizes instead both the contingencies that shaped the new order and the incompleteness of U.S. global predominance in the face the wave of anticolonial struggles that erupted out of the world war and the expansion of the non-capitalist (if hardly socialist) areas of the world in Eastern Europe and in China. Moreover, the new ideas and institutions necessary to structure the American-led international order had to first be constructed and then actually adopted. In the years after 1945, while the United States was at the apogee of its political and military power following the total defeat of Germany, Italy, and Japan, many parts of the world were in a state of collapse and convulsion. The lesson of the preceding decades was that zero-sum inter-imperialist competition inevitably led to great and destructive wars, which could open the door to popular revolutions, as had taken place across Europe between 1917 and 1923. Preventing a repeat slide towards protectionism and autarky during cycles of downturn—inevitable under capitalism—required, it seemed to

planners in Washington, a powerful state willing to manage the global economy while disciplining disruptive struggles for national self-determination at the periphery. In place of the "internal" divisions of labor seen in the colonial European empires and Axis autarkies, Washington thus envisaged establishing a global division of labor embedded within a multilateral political system in which independent and nominally equal nation states would trade freely with each other (Buchanan, 2021).

This new world order did not (and could not) simply spring into being with the formal end of hostilities, and there was resistance to it from many quarters after 1945. Washington's ambition to abolish regional autarkies involved not only crushing the new contiguous empires of the Axis states, but also ending the formal colonialism of the British, French and Dutch empires, each of which resented Washington's attempts to open to American capital the parts of the world they claimed to rule. Moreover, in the later years of the war the Roosevelt administration was forced to relax its earlier insistence on immediate postwar decolonization in the face of a growing wave of popular anticolonial revolution in South and Southeast Asia that posed a far graver threat to a global free market than did continued European colonialism (La Faber, 1975). Instead, Washington came to believe, the European colonial empires could be gradually abolished. This shift in U.S. war aims temporarily dampened the conflict between U.S. and European (especially British) imperialism, but it still left Washington facing two major challenges.

The first was that posed by the anti-colonial insurgencies that broke out across the "revolutionary crescent" stretching from Burma to the Philippines, which can be seen as a bold rejection both of the restoration of colonial rule and of the assigned place given to these countries in the new global division of labor.[5] Because these revolts threatened to take substantial parts of the world's labor and resources out of the new global economy, thus threatening the system as a whole, Washington responded by backing extensive counter-insurgency campaigns in Southeast Asia. Across this broad region, European armies, often relying on colonial troops and supported by the United States, battled to restore colonial rule and, when that failed, Washington attempted to

refashion these territories into weak but independent capitalist nation-states. This goal was only partially achieved: an uneasy (and in some cases temporary) peace settled over Indochina, Indonesia and the Philippines by the early 1950s, but the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 was an enormous setback for Roosevelt's vision of China as the key "policemen" of the new order in Asia. This phase of the greater or 'long' Second World War did not come to an end until the final partition of the Korean peninsula in 1953 stabilized the boundaries of the capitalist and non-capitalist worlds for the coming decades and restored a measure of political stability to Asia. Similarly, British and French imperialism were dealt a decisive blow by the Suez Crisis of 1956, which marked the full ascent of U.S. hegemony and the end of its reliance on London to police the Mediterranean and the Levant.

The second major threat to the nascent postwar order was that posed by the Soviet Union. Weakened by its titanic struggle against Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, based on the strength of its non-capitalist economic system, nonetheless emerged victorious and with great moral legitimacy. Not only in Asia, but also across Europe from Yugoslavia and Greece to Italy and France, Communists and partisan forces enjoyed enormous popular support which they sought to leverage for political voice in the postwar states. From 1943 on, these countries were convulsed by waves of popular insurgency in which working people pushed not only for anti-fascist political liberation but also for radical social and economic transformation. In this situation, Moscow's expanded reach was felt not only in the Red Army's occupation and Sovietization of Eastern Europe, but also in its influence over Communist Parties in Western Europe. The division of the European continent between the United States and the USSR which marked the beginning of the Cold War thus represented the limits of Washington's ability to extend the borders of the capitalist world beyond the Elbe. At the same time, however, this partition was the product of inter-allied negotiations that began at the Tehran Conference in November 1943, with Washington acceding to the integration of Eastern Europe into the Soviet sphere in exchange for Moscow's active support for the containment of popular insurgency in Western Europe and the consolidation there of

democratic capitalist states.

While the traditional parameters for the Second World War accurately describe what we have termed the "central paroxysm" of the war—the period of genuinely global war between 1941 and 1945—a true accounting of the causes and character of the war must set this period of intense and worldwide war within a broader cycle of armed imperial violence that stretched from 1931 to 1953.[6] As we have seen, this longer cycle of regional wars was rooted in the Great Depression—itself a product of the failure to secure a stable global order after World War I—and its was resolved by the rise of American imperialism and by the consolidation of the new, if qualified, world economic and political order brought into being by its victory. The project of rethinking the timeframe of the Second World War that we are proposing here is not about seeking the war's 'true' start and end points, but rather uses timelines as heuristic devices—constructs that facilitate investigation—that enable us to see, articulate, and understand big-picture *processes* and their interrelationships with new clarity.

**The Good Neighbor as a War Policy**

Framed in the context of this 'long' Second World War, the Good Neighbor Policy emerges clearly both as a direct response to the crisis of the Great Depression and as a series of economic, political, and military initiatives that helped to prepare the coming world war between the major imperialist powers. The Hoover and Roosevelt administrations, in common with ruling circles in other imperialist countries, responded to the Depression by pushing to create an autarkic regional space, and in this sense the subsequent reorganization of the Americas under U.S. leadership paralleled the autarkic projects of the other great powers. However, while it is important to highlight the commonality between the Good Neighbor and other regional-autarkic projects, it is also necessary to note the differences. In contrast to autarkic blocs built on the existing colonial empires of Britain and France, on the newly conquered colonial spaces of Italy and Japan, and on the violently occupied and annexed nation-states ruled by Germany, Washington's "hemispheric" hegemony was founded on relations with independent and sovereign nation-states.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the uniqueness of Latin America as a region in world history. Liberated from colonial rule in the Age of Revolutions, Latin American countries emerged as independent nation-states in the democratic age of the nineteenth century. As such, they often embraced international law and the order it imposed on world politics, seeing in its multilateral institutions the possibility of establishing equality and fairness between sovereign states (Grandin, 2012). At the same time, Latin American countries were often also the most vocal critics of the way the world system worked in practice. Perhaps the most notable example of this tension, and a sure sign of things to come, was in evidence at the Hague Peace Conference in 1907. Urged to attend by Washington, Latin American participation lent legitimacy to U.S. goals by draping them in the mantle of multilateralism. But there was also opposition to U.S. aims, and Argentina led ten Latin American countries in protest against the draft Convention, which rode roughshod over national sovereignty by sanctioning the use of military force to recover debts (Coates, 2016, p. 120-125). While the Convention was ultimately adopted, the episode revealed the double-edged sword inherent in Washington's vision of a world order composed of formally equal sovereign states over which it would be the nominal ruler. A global economic system based on the principles of private property and free trade required buy-in from non-European countries if it was not to be seen merely as imperialism in a new guise, but it was precisely because sovereign nation-states were formally equal and *not* colonies that they could, and often did, pose challenges to U.S. ambitions.

These historically determined relationships meant that the construction of a U.S. dominated autarkic region necessitated bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives towards the sovereign nation-states of Latin America. Washington's hegemony over the entire continent could not be constructed by force, whatever the power advantage enjoyed by the northern colossus and despite its long history of violent intervention into its immediate southern borderlands. In this light, it is also important to recognize that while Washington had projected itself as the leader and protector of the independent republics of the Americas since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, and

while it had established forceful domination over much of Central America and the Caribbean after 1898, in the early 1930s it was still far from being the hegemonic leader of the Americas as a whole.

Washington's new drive to extend its predominance into South America began with its public renunciation of military intervention into the internal affairs of American states at the 1933 Pan-American Conference in Montevideo. Under the leadership of Secretary of State Cordell Hull, this pledge of good neighborly behavior was quickly followed by the negotiation of bilateral trade agreements with several Latin American countries, authorized under the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act.[7] These bilateral agreements and their accompanying most-favored-nation clauses were underpinned by U.S. support for economic development programs in Latin America that were funded by the new Export-Import Bank (the EXIM, set up in 1934) and by U.S. Treasury Department initiatives to overhaul the banking and finance systems in several Latin American countries. Washington also threw its weight behind plans to establish an Inter-American Bank capable of mobilizing capital for regional development projects throughout Latin America (Helleiner, 2014, p. 53-54, 60-61).

In 1940, these U.S. initiatives were substantially reinforced by the establishment of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), a sprawling New Deal bureaucracy set up under Nelson Rockefeller's leadership. As it worked to develop a dense regional network of administrators and officials, the OCIAA funded projects to develop industry and communications, promote a healthier workforce, and advance cultural, scientific and academic exchange.[8] Through these cultural initiatives, Washington pushed to shape a common intellectual and ideological space in the Americas, with the OCIAA's carefully crafted vision of collaboration and mutually beneficial economic development coming to dominate the airwaves, newspapers, film shows, and art exhibitions across the region. The projection of U.S. hegemony in the Americas thus combined elements of 'hard' economic power with the 'soft' power of cultural leadership. Moreover, while bilateral trade agreements tended to reinforce Latin America's role as an exporter of raw materials and an

importer of manufactured goods, U.S. aid held out the promise of economic and social advance through industrialization and 'modernization.' Washington's drive to promote its own autarkic free-trade zone in the Americas was thus wrapped in assurances that this project would benefit all regional actors.

In this light, the Good Neighbor Policy and the fight to establish hemispheric autarky—and not 'isolation' or 'neutrality,' as is often claimed—were the key foreign policy components of the New Deal (Blower, 2014). In common with other major New Deal programs, the Good Neighbor was less a single distinct policy and more a raft of initiatives advanced by a broad array of executive agencies that sometimes appeared to be at odds with each other.[9] Moreover, and in common with other New Deal responses to the deep crisis of capitalism signaled by the Depression, the Good Neighbor Policy used executive authority to mobilize "public" capital through the EXIM and other state agencies in order to fund development projects that private bankers and investors were unwilling to touch, particularly in a region marked by chronic insolvency and debt default (Adamson, 2005).

As regional conflicts around the world intensified in the mid-1930s and a new world war loomed on the horizon, Washington pushed to develop new military dimensions of the Good Neighbor Policy. At a regional level this involved a protracted campaign to establish a multilateral (or 'Hemispheric) pan-American defense agreement. This effort was pursued through the Pan-American conferences a held in Buenos Aires (1936), Lima (1938), and Rio (1942) and through special meetings of American foreign ministers held in Panama (1939) and Havana (1940) in response to the outbreak of war in Europe. These initiatives resulted first in the establishment of hemispheric neutrality—complete with an oceanic neutral zone extending deep into the Atlantic and Pacific oceans—and then, after the United States entered the world war in December 1941, in a dyssynchronous series of diplomatic breaks with the Axis powers and declarations of war against them.

These pan-American initiatives were underpinned by the rapid expansion of bilateral military agreements between the United States and all of its

southern neighbors except Argentina. These agreements covered the exchange of military representatives and attachés, the provision of U.S. equipment and training to national militaries, and invitations to senior Latin American officers to attend U.S. staff colleges (Conn; Fairchild, 1960; Haynes, 1977, p. esp. 376-378). At the same time, Washington began building a 200-strong network of bases throughout the Americas, utilizing bilateral access agreements, the government-backed activity of Pan American Airlines, the 1940 'Destroyers for Bases' agreement with Britain, and the construction or expansion of bases on U.S.-ruled territory in Cuba, Panama, and Puerto Rico (Herman, 2022; Ray, 1975; Vlek, 2014, p. 82-88; Whitham, 2013). At the same time, two thosand U.S. troops occupied the Dutch colony of Surinam—and secured access to its vital bauxite mines—after the German occupation of the Netherlands in summer 1940. Many of these initiatives involved negotiating basing agreements and resolving questions of sovereignty and extraterritoriality, giving Washington experience with the kind of 'status of forces' agreements that would legitimize the establishment of its worldwide network of bases after the war. These military dimensions of the Good Neighbor Policy centered above all on the development of a close military alliance with Brazil. This alliance was backed by substantial flows of Lend-Lease equipment and led in 1944 to the dispatch, on Rio's initiative, of a 25,000-strong Brazilian Expeditionary Force to join the Allied armies fighting in Italy (McCann, 1973).

Taken together, these military agreements, alliances, and initiatives transformed the military dimensions of Washington's hemispheric autarkic project, first by securing U.S. military predominance in the Caribbean and Central America and then by projecting—for the first time—a substantial U.S. military presence into South America. In this light, the development of 'hemispheric defense' in the late 1930s and early 1940s should be understood as an inseparable complement to the more widely recognized economic, political, and cultural aspects of the Good Neighbor Policy: in fact, the military and the civilian dimensions were mutually supportive and, as President Truman would later describe the relationship between the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, "two halves of the same walnut."[10] As a genuinely worldwide war unfolded

after December 1941 with the United States at its center, these combined aspects of the Good Neighbor Policy worked together to secure the hemisphere from Axis penetration, expand Washington's overseas military footprint, secure its critical South Atlantic supply lines via bases in the Caribbean and Northeast Brazil, and ensure uninterrupted access to a wide range of strategic raw materials essential to U.S. war production. As such, Latin America was truly Washington's 'springboard to victory' in the global war.

At the same time, and precisely because it rested on relations between independent and formally equal nation-states rather than on a regime of colonial rule or of military conquest, Washington's hemispheric hegemony allowed it to model on a regional scale the kind of U.S.-led association of independent nation-states that it envisaged creating on a world scale after the war. Washington's newly-assembled regional predominance thus also provided an indispensable springboard for its push to create a new U.S.-led world order.[11] The first world-level political result of Washington's advancing regional hegemony was registered in its ability to marshal nine Central American and Caribbean states to the signing of the Declaration of the United Nations in January 1942, thus underscoring at the very start of the worldwide war the project of creating a postwar order based on formally equal nation-states. President Roosevelt had already established the ideological framework for this approach, noting in an April 1939 speech to the governing board of the Pan American Union that the example of inter-American cooperation was a "light opening on dark waters" and a "living message" sent from the collaborative nations of the Western Hemisphere to the troubled states of the "Old World." (Roosevelt, 1939)[12]

The U.S.-led bloc quickly expanded to include most of Latin America, with Mexico declaring war in May 1942, Brazil in August, and Chile in January 1943. While Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela did not formally join the war until early 1945, they were broadly aligned with the United States throughout. Alone among the Latin American countries, Argentina waged an ongoing political campaign against Washington's demand that it declare war on the Axis. Buenos Aires only finally joined the conflict in March 1945, just in

time to secure a seat at the founding conference of the United Nations.

Leadership of this pan-American bloc gave Washington tremendous political leverage in its push to secure acceptance of a series of world-level initiatives, with Latin American delegates giving vital support to the United States at the conference to establish the new world economic order at Bretton Woods in June 1944, at the Convention on International Civil Aviation in Chicago in November 1944, and at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in spring 1945 (Helleiner, 2014; Vlek, 2014, p. 183-192). The British, who were battling to defend their own global interests, were alarmed by Washington's ability to wield the weight of the American bloc, with chief British negotiator at Bretton Woods John Maynard Keynes noting unhappily that "the vote of Costa Rica is the same as the vote of the United Kingdom."[13] There was, however, nothing that the former global hegemon could do in the face of the moral and numerical weight of the American bloc, established as a key component of the worldwide anti-fascist alliance at the start of the war and legitimized by adoption of the Atlantic Charter.

At the same time, and precisely because they relied on ostensibly free relations between independent and equal nation-states, the economic, political, and military initiatives launched by the United States under the aegis of the Good Neighbor Policy all required careful negotiation and diplomatic management by Washington. This process was strengthened by the OCIAA's campaign to project a sense of hemispheric cultural integration, but it was fundamentally incentivized by flows of military aid and, above all, by promises of U.S. investment in regional economic development. This required sublimating a profound contradiction, with Latin American support for the free trade-based world order proclaimed at Bretton Woods being given in exchange for U.S. promises to fund the kind of domestic Latin American industrialization that would require significant tariff barriers to protect it from foreign competition, including from north American businesses. This contradiction only makes sense because Latin American leaders understood that their pivotal role in securing Washington's coming global hegemony gave them an unusual degree of leverage, so it did not seem unreasonable to hope that they might be partially exempted from

U.S. insistence on postwar free trade. Other aspects of inter-American relations also exhibited a degree of real give-and-take, with Washington accepting Latin American insistence on Argentina's readmission to the pan-American system in order to secure its desired agreement on regional defense at the Inter-American Conference on the Problems of War and Peace held in Chapultepec, Mexico, in February 1945.

This complex interrelationship between the United States and Latin America was further highlighted at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in spring 1945. At the start of the conference Latin American countries accounted for twenty of the forty-six government delegations in attendance, and under Washington's leadership the American bloc operated—as commentator Walter Lippmann noted—as a "steamroller" capable of giving decisive support to U.S. plans for the new world organization.[14] However, while the backing of Latin American leaders was critical to the construction of the political architecture of Washington's emerging global hegemony, it required difficult negotiations to finesse their insistence on the integration of the hemispheric organization established at Chapultepec into the structure of the new world organization in a way that preserved a significant degree of regional autonomy. Many U.S. leaders were reluctant to compromise the pure 'globalism' of the United Nations by condoning the 'regionalism' of the Latin American states but, in the context of challenges to their leadership from both the British and the Soviets, they had no choice but to agree. The result was the insertion of special clauses—Articles 51-54—into the United Nations Charter that sanctioned regional associations within the framework of the global.

The political consolidation of U.S. hegemony in the Americas was grounded in its advancing economic predominance. During the war, U.S. businesses took advantage of the inevitable disruption of transatlantic trade to displace their German and British rivals in the region. In the 1930s, state-backed German businesses had used barter-type agreements—attractive to many Latin American countries because they did not require access to hard currency—to make significant inroads in key hemispheric markets, especially in Brazil. In particular, German airlines backed by the Nazi government supplied the

airplanes, pilots, and spare parts that enabled regional airlines throughout Latin America to develop robust networks of aerial trade and transportation (Fortes, 2025). By 1940, however, the British naval blockade had effectively ruptured German trans-oceanic trade, forcing Latin American corporations to refocus on the United States. In this context, Pan American Airlines, acting with aggressive state department support, was able to liquidate its German-sponsored competitors as supplies of spare parts and trained personnel dried up. Meanwhile, British businesses that were heavily committed to the domestic war effort found it increasingly difficult to fulfill contracts in Latin America, particularly those involving heavy capital goods. Backed by the state department, U.S. corporations exploited the opportunity to push the British aside: in Brazil, for example, a consortium of General Electric and Westinghouse replaced Manchester-based Metropolitan Vickers as the supplier of equipment for the electrification of the government-run Central Brazil Railway (Mills, 2009). Washington also utilized its ongoing campaign against 'fascist' Argentina to disrupt Anglo-Argentine trade relations and to undermine one of London's main economic gateways into the region. In this way the war and the Good Neighbor Policy allowed the United States to complete and consolidate its economic predominance in Latin America in ways that could not be reversed once the fighting was over.

Washington's march toward regional hegemony was not without its difficulties. Some challenges—like Mexico's 1938 nationalization of U.S. land and oil interests—were quickly resolved in the context of Mexico's integration into America's booming wartime economy. In contrast, Argentina's determined and ongoing resistance to U.S. regional predominance proved more intractable. Underpinned by its long trade relationship with Britain and by its own well-developed financial system and domestic industrialization, Buenos Aires had long pictured itself as the natural leader of Latin America and of the Southern Cone in particular. Resistance to the advance of U.S. hegemony, expressed during the war by an insistence on neutrality, provoked tremendous and even irrational anger in Washington, which responded by denouncing Argentina as fascist and organizing to excise it from the pan-American system. This campaign

culminated in early 1946 in Washington's open—if unsuccessful—effort to block the election of populist nationalist Juan Perón. Argentinian resistance to U.S. predominance and the ill-considered response to it undoubtedly delayed the full consolidation of Washington's regional predominance until its eventual rapprochement with Buenos Aires within the framework of Cold War anti-Communism in the early 1950s.

Remarkably, the wartime advance of US hegemony in the Americas was welcomed and supported by Moscow and by the national Communist parties in the United States and Latin America that looked to it for leadership. In the framework of the worldwide popular front against the Axis, Moscow argued that a protracted period of capitalist development—and not socialist revolution— was on the agenda in Latin America, and that regional Communist parties should therefore seek strategic alliances with 'progressive' sectors of the national bourgeoisie (Botz, 2018; Harmer, 2014, p. esp 138). This approach also reflected the division of the world into spheres of U.S. and Soviet influence established at the Tehran Conference, and it prompted Communists to emphasize peaceful—that is class struggle-less—national development centered on industrialization and modernization. With Moscow focused on national defense and the consolidation of its control over Eastern Europe, this approach reflected its lack of interest in Latin America, its hopes for continued postwar 'peaceful coexistence' with the United States, and its willingness to accede to Washington's predominance outside of its own immediate sphere of interest. Communist policy thus embraced the promise of industrialization and modernization held out by advocates of the Good Neighbor Policy in Washington. In the light of this conjunctural wartime convergence between Moscow and Washington, it is not surprising that two key figures in the formulation of U.S. policy towards Latin America—Laurence Duggan and Harry Dexter White—later turned out to have connections to Soviet intelligence (Cuordileone, 2011, p. esp. 615-619, 626). Ironically, the work of these 'spies' only succeeded in facilitating the development of Washington's regional predominance.

The world war—and the expanded wartime production it stimulated—had a significant impact on Latin America, with the growing size and militancy

of the working class in several key countries combining with the enhanced influence and prestige of 'progressive' bourgeois forces to produce a continent-wide wave of strikes, coups, popular revolts, and liberal electoral victories (Fortes, 2024). Together, these late-war developments resulted in the opening of a short-lived but continent-wide "democratic window."[15] Washington's own rhetorical wartime advocacy of democracy seemed to encourage this opening, and the United States was not initially unsympathetic to it, particularly as it provided ideological reinforcement for the construction of its new liberal world order. In the context of Washington's rapidly-deepening hostility towards the USSR in the early postwar, however, U.S. leaders increasingly framed their hemispheric leadership in terms of anti-Communism. This shift was registered at the conference to formalize the regional defense pact held in Rio in 1947, and it was made even more explicit at the setting up of the Organization of American States in Bogotá the following year. At both conferences, the United States effectively blocked discussion on economic development, with Secretary of State George Marshall making it clear that there would be no large-scale U.S. backing for regional industrialization and no Marshall Plan-like aid program for Latin America (Rabe, 1978).

This sharp turn in US policy overlapped with a series of political realignments within Latin America that saw traditional landed elites and their allies in the military and the church push back against liberal-working class blocs in a series of political reversals that culminated in the CIA-backed coup in Guatemala in 1954. Across the continent, this conservative wave effectively closed the 'democratic window' and opened a new period in which U.S. hegemony meshed with the pan-continental emergence of rightist military regimes. Communist parties, legalized in several countries during the war, were stripped of legal standing and subject to a new wave of persecution. Across the continent, Washington's political shift was underpinned by a sharp turn away from the state-centric economic corporatism of the New Deal and towards the global 'free' market outlined at Bretton Woods (Brinkley, 1995, p. esp 268-271). This shift resolved the unstable contradiction between U.S. promises of state-sponsored economic development on the one hand and its insistence on a regime of international

free trade on the other. Wartime U.S. capital investment had produced some significant economic development—the construction of the Volta Redonda steel mill in Brazil is the most striking example—but nowhere did it lead to generalized industrialization. Now, and in the context of the postwar political turn, traditional neocolonial relationships based on the export of food and raw materials to the United States and the import of U.S. manufactured goods reasserted themselves with full force.

**Some conclusions: Latin America in the World War**

As we hope we have demonstrated here today, Washington's project of establishing its postwar global hegemony was qualitatively different from the models of colonialism practiced by the European powers, even if there remained colonial elements in the U.S. system, including formal territorial control over Guam, Guantanamo Bay, Puerto Rico, and newly acquired Pacific islands. Despite its relative lack of formal colonies, this was an imperialist system nonetheless: as wartime Latin American exports of food and raw materials to the United States increased, so too did inflows of U.S. capital investment that constituted, as Lenin argued, the heart of imperialism. This was the true character of the Good Neighbor in the years after Washington renounced direct military intervention, and it made visible in Latin America the novel form of American plans for a world system of sovereign nation-states, one that would present Washington with both unique opportunities and unique challenges.

Both because of their unique historical trajectory and because of their geographic proximity to the "Colossus of the North", the Latin American republics constituted the only region of the world that could serve in the strategic role that Washington's plans for the postwar global order required. At the same time, the cumulative effect of the Good Neighbor Policy's initiatives was to bind the region to the United States more closely than ever in both economic and military terms. As the participants at this conference have discussed over the past three days, military programs, involving transfers of military equipment, U.S.-sponsored training programs (including the transformation of Brazil's Agulhas Negras Military Academy into the "West Point" of the Americas),

base and infrastructure construction, and the integration of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force into U.S. command structures, all occurred *alongside* the bilateral trade agreements, rhetorical gestures to Pan-American solidarity, and the creation of a hemispheric intellectual and cultural milieu that are most often viewed as the hallmarks of the Good Neighbor Policy.

Viewed in this light, the Good Neighbor Policy cannot be seen as a benevolent interregnum in a history of U.S.-Latin American relations otherwise marked by violent eruptions of northern power. On the contrary, the consolidation of hemispheric autarky under the Good Neighbor *accelerated* U.S. domination over South America—which was far from assured before the 1930s—by eroding Latin America's capacity to operate as a 'middle ground' poised between Europe and the United States. The Good Neighbor, in other words, heralded an all-out assault on the political and economic relationships that Latin American countries, especially Argentina and Brazil, had previously enjoyed with Britain, Germany, and Italy, thereby leaving them with far less room for maneuver against their powerful northern neighbor in the years to come.

Nevertheless, and as elsewhere in the U.S. project of global hegemony, Washington's domination of Latin America was always qualified, as evidenced by the fact that from the entire region the United States could only marshal a single Colombian battalion to participate in its 'United Nations' contingent in the Korean War. In this sense, the end of the Korean War in 1953—the point that we have taken to signal the end of the "Global Second World War"—came several years *after* the conclusion of the 'long war' in Latin America as both sides had come to believe that the Good Neighbor Policy had outlived its usefulness by the time of the Bogotá conference in 1948. This realization should lead us again to ask the question of what changed and what didn't in the years of the Good Neighbor Policy. The abandonment of a 'Marshall Plan for Latin America' that might have industrialized the continent marked a sharp turn away from earlier promises of U.S. investment in industrial development, but the use of U.S. military force—as evidenced in Washington's strong-arm diplomacy to counter the threat of German activity in Guatemala or its support for the overthrow of Arnulfo Arías in Panama in 1940—had never fully disappeared. By

the formal end of the war in 1945, ruling classes across the continent could rely on the U.S. military to support their bids to secure political power, while their land, air, and naval forces operated U.S. equipment, received U.S. training, and were capable of being integrated into U.S. command structures. Their ability to independently exercise military power outside of their own borders—a traditional hallmark of national sovereignty—had effectively been eradicated. Thenceforth, from the early 1950s onwards, Latin American countries were locked into a world of neocolonial dependency from which it proved very difficult to escape.

Until now, Latin America's place within the global Second World War has been largely neglected by most scholars outside of the region itself. But, as we have argued here, focusing on the intersection of key *regions* of the world with unfolding *global* processes offers new and profound insights into the structural trends and super-structural shocks that together animate historical change, particularly in the context of global war. And, as our "Greater Second World War" framework suggests, the fact that the world war's 'central paroxysm' was bracketed by a series of regional crises with their own local dynamics—all of which ultimately became subsumed into the forcefield of the larger war—meant that the global war itself necessarily had different geographies and chronologies in different parts of the world. These overlapping timelines constitute a contrapuntal process of winding into global war and out of it again and they reveal the messiness of an old world order unravelling and a new one struggling to come into being.

When we apply this approach more broadly, the salience of the intersection between regional and global dynamics in other parts of the world comes sharply into view. The war in the Pacific, for example, ceases to be an exclusively U.S. domain and instead becomes a site of inter-imperial and indigenous contestation, with U.S., Australian, and Indian troops fighting Imperial Japan on British colonial territory while relying for logistical support on conscripted Indigenous labor and radically reshaping the environments and economies of these places with dramatic long-term consequences (Jackson, 2025). Similarly, shifting our focus away from the clash between British Imperial forces and the

Imperial Japanese Army in Burma and towards the wider world of the Indian Ocean—which conveyed Royal Indian Navy troops, soldiers of the King's African Rifles, Italian prisoners-of-war, and refugees and radicals of all stripes across the sea between Dar Es Salaam, Mumbai, Surabaya, and Sydney—reveals a set of imperial pathways upon which the future leaders of decolonization movements encountered new ideas and formed the bonds that would underlie the global wave of strikes and mutinies that broke out across the world in 1946, including, as we have seen, in Latin America (Manjrekar, 2025).

Taking our cue from these examples, which new scholarship has already begun to explore, we have today proposed a timeline and geography for Latin America's Greater Second World War: 1933-1948—that is to say from the initiation of the Good Neighbor Policy in Montevideo to its unwinding in Bogotá fifteen years later. We hope that this new framework is of some use in rethinking the Second World War in the Western Hemisphere as we collectively insist on the central significance of Latin America both to the global conflict and to the world order it wrought. It is, we conclude, impossible to understand the rapid and successful consolidation of the new U.S.-led world order without grasping the ways in which that order was already economically, politically, militarily, and ideologically grounded on Washington's predominance in the Americas.





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**Notas**

[1]Text of Keynote Address to Conference on "The Good Neighbor Policy in Time of War", Rio de Janeiro, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, August 9, 2024.

[2]Senior lecturer at the University of Vermont.

[3]Assistant professor of history (US in the world) at Cornell University.

[4]On the marginalization of Latin America in standard accounts of World War II: Gerhard Weinberg's magisterial *A World At Arms* devotes just two pages to Latin America, Thomas Zeiler's *Annihilation* sees it merely as an 'important support area for the Allies,' and Evan Mawdsley fails to mention it at all. See Weinberg (1994, p. 505-506), Zeiler (2011, p. 65) and Mawdsley (2020).

[5]For the "crescent of revolution" see Bayly and Harper (2007).

[6]On the idea of a "paroxysm" framed by a broader 'cycle of armed imperial conflict,' see Gerwarth and Manela (2014, esp. 787).

[7]On this and other economic aspects of the Good Neighbor, see Gardner (1964).

[8]For recent scholarship, see Prutsch (2023). This collection contains several valuable essays highlighting the dense networks of OCIAA activity.

[9]On the Good Neighbor and the New Deal, see Smith (2023, p. esp. 10-11). Despite this recent work, the Good Neighbor is largely absent from much of the scholarship on the New Deal. For an account that does integrate the Good Neighbor into the New Deal, see Patel (2016). Amy Offner (2019) is also relevant here although the war itself is almost entirely absent from the account of New Deal-inspired interventions in Latin American economies and the legacies they left behind.

[10]Truman, quoted in Offner (2002, p. 213).

[11]For a theoretical examination of the relationship between regional and global hegemony, see Mearsheimer (2010, p. esp. 387-388).

[12]See also Kimball (1991, p. esp. 107-109).

[13]Keynes, quoted in Helleiner (2014, p. 159-160). Keynes infamously complained that the presence of numerous delegations "with nothing to contribute" made the conference "the most monstrous monkey-house assembled in years." See also Kedar (2010, p. 216).

[14]Influential commentator Walter Lippmann, quoted in Smith (2004, p. 402).

[15]For a summary of this process, see Bethell and Roxborough (1992).







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