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From the Good Neighbor Policy to the Fundacion Amistad: A Useful Historical Reminder for Obama [1]

Cultural historians mostly discourage making cross-history comparisons of important events, since they take place in fundamentally different contexts and the parallels that are drawn are rarely meaningful or useful. With that caveat, I will argue how President Obama's administration might best utilize the soft power of cultural diplomacy by recalling a similarly pivotal moment from March 4, 1933.

Upon being sworn in as president that day, Franklin D. Roosevelt briefly enunciated his administration's foreign policy goals toward Latin America and the Caribbean. This statement marked the end of a series of military interventions by the U.S. government in the region. At a time when America was faced with an intractable economic depression, this Good Neighbor Policy would favor Pan-Americanism over unpopular military coercion, diplomacy over imperialistic meddling by the "Colossus of the North." The new administration was well aware of our country's negative reputation in Latin America after decades of unilateral police actions favoring the interests of the U.S.

The U.S. had long demonstrated an active military and commercial interest in the region (see *Federalist Paper No. 11* from 1787, in which Alexander Hamilton expresses the need for American economic expansion in the West Indies). Over the next century, the United States used military force to decide the 1846 Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty that allowed American supervision of the Panama-Colombia region, during the "Watermelon War" of 1856, the Spanish-American War of 1898, and in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt promulgated the notion of a permanent U.S. military presence in the region for the next hundred years.

The Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 asserted that America had carte blanche to intervene militarily in Latin American affairs if necessary to protect U.S. interests. In his December 1904 address to Congress, Roosevelt stated:

> If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.

The "Banana Wars," a series of American occupations and police actions from 1898 to 1932, driven principally by significant economic interests in fruit, tobacco, and sugar cane, helped the U.S. maintain their sphere of influence in the northern regions of South America and the Caribbean. Countries where the U.S. displayed both military and economic force include Nicaragua, occupied by the U.S. continually from 1912 through 1933; Cuba, occupied by the U.S. from 1899 to 1902, and controlled through the Platt Amendment until the early 1930s; Haiti, occupied by the U.S. from 1916 through 1934; Honduras, where the United and Standard Fruit Companies controlled banana exports through armed U.S. interventions from 1903 through 1925; and Mexico, where U.S. forces patrolled and secured various sections of the shared border, sparking prolonged unrest between the two nations through World War I. Franklin Roosevelt, in a reversal of Teddy Roosevelt's Big Stick diplomacy, proclaimed on his inaugural day:

> In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.

In an effort to reverse the ill-fated 1904 Roosevelt Corollary — an outgrowth of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that declared America wholly intolerant of European intervention in Latin America — Franklin Roosevelt was well aware that devoting a couple of well-wrought sentences to a new diplomatic tact in his inaugural address would not solve the fraught domestic and foreign situations he inherited on that cold March day. Beyond this formal yet vague declaration of fair play and diplomatic openness by the new administration, it was not until a few years later that the U.S. would implement a specific strategic agency dedicated to the soft power side of realpolitik. The Division of Cultural Relations (1938) and later Nelson Rockefeller's Office for Inter-American Affairs (1940) formalized a neighborly, though strategic, plan to continue to present American values and culture to foreign audiences. In a nutshell, the U.S. feared the encroachment of Nazism and fascism in Latin America and used cultural diplomatic resources as a principal weapon to stave off this ideological infiltration.

Not unlike FDR, Obama has inherited an Augean stable of economic depression, dangerous international scenarios, and big questions as to how to revamp and refocus the cultural element within public diplomacy. Like FDR at the Montevideo Conference in 1933 and Lima in 1938, the new U.S. president has so far successfully projected a positive image of America to a world grown stubbornly suspicious of the U.S. and its manner of involvement in the War on Terror (or as Newt Gingrich likes to call it, World War III). FDR came to understand, after

much persuasion by his foreign policy advisors, that what was needed was a government agency with a special kind of leader. He found that person in Rockefeller. I suggest we also see this position as a wartime cultural consigliere who can function effectively within the Washington political machine and simultaneously initiate cultural programming that can potentially reach the most unreachable of foreign audiences. See my colleague Nick Cull's CPD Blog post on the need for an American "culture tsar."

The science of exhibiting U.S. culture has been a challenge since Jefferson displayed a moose carcass from Vermont in his apartment on the Champs-Elysées to prove to Buffon that Americans and their fauna were not degenerate. America continues to battle perceptions of degeneracy against a world public opinion that doubts our motives, strength, and ability to ably handle the War on Terror.

The outlook for the future success of U.S. cultural diplomacy appears increasingly positive with two bits of recent news: America will host a pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. . This type of soft power intervention has the potential to win over millions of Chinese moderates and intellectuals.

Another example of nongovernmental cultural diplomacy is the recent activity of the Fundación Amistad, a nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of U.S.-Cuba relations, and its support of the 10th Havana Bienniel. Showcasing the first exhibition of American artists in Cuba in decades, the curator of contemporary art at Havana's Fine Arts Museum Aberlado Mana stated: "This is the first exhibition we made after Obama rose to power. This is a kind of lighthouse of the next process of the culture and the politics between Cuba and the United States"

Wherever the venue, a sophisticated presentation of American arts and culture can continue to make inroads against negative perceptions of us. If foreign audiences can obtain an impression of America free of governmental filters, they can better decide for themselves what our country really is and what it represents to them.

President Obama has stated that he will chart a different foreign policy path from the Bush administration. However, he has yet to articulate a substantial cultural diplomacy plan. Our new president must surely know that his administration must do more than find a way to handle the hearts and minds of demographics who view America immoderately.

It also wouldn't hurt to win over Americans who supported the McCain-Palin ticket as well — who, in the midst of the current global economic upheaval, need a leader to inspire confidence in the survival of our union. Cultural diplomacy takes time to work, and in the words of USIA veteran Richard Arndt, it provides no quick fixes. While it is conceivable that extremists in corners of the world hostile to America could be won over in time to Obama's "good neighbor" position, the real scary places — Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Korea — are beyond the reach of our current genteel methods of cultural diplomacy.

Civilians in these places, whether they are for or against America, are much more concerned about escaping Taliban-driven violence or securing their next meal from the good graces of their Dear Leader.