

Imaginary Hemispheres: Myriad Latin American Perspectives Engage Nelson Rockefeller in 1969

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Summary

In the spring and summer of 1969, Nelson Rockefeller embarked on four ill-fated journeys to twenty Latin American countries on a "fact-finding tour" for U.S. President Richard Nixon. The voyages sought to forge a new multilateral American foreign policy and initiate a period of hemispheric collaboration; instead, they brought massive demonstrations, military repression, and a trail of blood, leading contemporaries and historians to view the trip as a public relations disaster. The research I conducted at the Rockefeller Archive Center over the course of two weeks in August 2009 with the support of a Grant-in-Aid suggests that this view does not accurately reflect the complexity of the encounters that the trip engendered. Indeed, the visits crystallized a series of transnational imaginaries that crossed class and political lines across the hemisphere. This represented my fourth trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center and the second with the support of a Grant-in-Aid.[1]

The Presidential Mission

Soon after his 1969 inauguration, President Richard Nixon contacted Galo Plaza, Secretary of the Organization of American States, to ask his advice concerning the best means to bolster U.S. ties with Latin America. Plaza suggested that Nixon enlist New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller to visit the region, as "his name is still magic." Rockefeller was surprised to receive the invitation from his former rival for the Republican nomination, but quickly agreed to undertake the journey. In his typically largesse manner, however, the Governor quickly expanded the goodwill tour into a "Presidential Mission" that would take him to twenty countries south of the Rio Grande in an effort to create a hemispheric gesture of solidarity. However, as his former speechwriter, Joseph Persico put it, "[Rockefeller's] name was still magic to the oligarchies, the *latifundistas*, the conservative, U.S. educated, and the old-family ruling classes in Latin America. But to the Latin left, his name was anathema." [2] Beginning with the death of a demonstrator in Honduras, the trip soon devolved into what Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett

have termed the "Rocky Horror Road Show:" a polarizing moment characterized by mass protests and the fanning of virulent anti-American fires.[3] When the Governor returned, the Administration and Congress met the recommendation for a multilateral approach to hemispheric unity with polite acceptance before shelving them as the State Department pursued a systematic policy of intensifying a militaristic solution to the challenge posed by the red flames burning to the south.

The Scholarship and its Gaps

The existing historiography on the subject is slight, partially as a result of a general perception that the journey represented an unmitigated policy and public relations failure. This view was articulated as early as 1970 by James Petras and has formed the basic framework for subsequent treatments of the journey, including a brief treatment in Colby and Dennett's study of Nelson Rockefeller's ties to the petroleum industry in Latin America and more extensively in Peter Bales' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation "Nelson Rockefeller and His Quest for Inter-American Unity." [4] A number of contemporary essays and later surveys of US-Latin American relations have also treated the mission's report as a flawed and anachronistic Cold War document that called for greater Inter-American governmental cooperation but failed to call for extensive social reforms. Both of these interpretations are in serious need of revision.

The existing scholarship has been based largely on American periodicals and the report Rockefeller submitted to Nixon because research predated the availability of several important document series at the Rockefeller Archive Center. These include planning materials such as briefing books, correspondence with Latin American leaders, the minutes of Rockefeller's meetings with members of the Rand Corporation, the Council on Foreign Affairs and other think tanks, as well as myriad drafts of the official report. Over the past two years, the papers of several members of the Governor's support staff, including Special Assistant James M. Cannon, the speechwriter Joseph A. Persico, and secretaries Diane Van Wie and Ann Whitman, have also been released.[5] This broad documentary evidence demonstrates a much more nuanced understanding of the region than that which would become enshrined in the *Rockefeller Report on the Americas*. [6] The drafts of the report, for example, include copious discussions of structural adjustments necessary to address social troubles of the region, the perspective of labor and student activists, and some virulent castigations of American policy. As such, they document the degree to which the final report represented a consciously fabricated vision of the hemisphere that purposely elided its unsavory attributes, an image of a simplified Latin America palatable to both the Nixon Administration and the American public.

A second series of documents hitherto ignored by historians also challenges the reductive constitution of the mission as an unmitigated failure in fomenting inter-American solidarity. These consist of thousands of appeals within the Countries Series of Nelson Rockefeller's

personal files that were penned in the mission's wake by a wide variety of correspondents, including urban professionals, petty merchants, parents, retirees, schoolchildren, the infirm, and other needy individuals. Although summarily dismissed with ubiquitous form letters by members of his staff, the solicitations demonstrate the impact that Rockefeller's mission and his philanthropic reputation had at the popular level in Latin America. Individuals requested aid for a dizzying variety of needs, of which the most common are educational support, medical payments, new employment, or immigration assistance.

Several institutions also sought help from the Governor for development projects, the construction of new schools, and orphanages. Taxi drivers requested second-hand cars, con-artists hoped for bundles of cash, while numerous parents asked that Rockefeller adopt their children or stand as godfather. Most correspondents articulated their request within the framework of the mission whose object "to listen" to Latin Americans had been repeatedly invoked by Rockefeller and his associates in the local press. As such, these requests are couched as mini exposés of poverty and hardship designed to arouse sympathy and a positive reply. Many distanced themselves from the "extremist" elements that had confronted Nixon's emissary in the summer of 1969, in the process underscoring their support for the democratic ideals of the United States; indeed, some wrote with no other object than to establish their disdain of the radicals and students whom they blamed for destabilizing their country and insulting the "great American."

An Overview of Research Conducted

As mentioned above, this represented my fourth visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center in conjunction with this project and the second undertaken with the support of a Grant-in-Aid. My previous research focused largely upon the Countries files for Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela (unfinished) and read through several staff records found in the Presidential Mission Files. During this visit, I concluded my research in the Countries files but especially focused upon the logistics of the mission as conveyed in the Presidential Mission series. I also reviewed some film footage of the Governor's first trip to Mexico and Central America.

Countries Files Report (RG III, 4, E)

As mentioned in my previous Grant-in-Aid report, the countries files comprise some of the most exiting materials connected with the Presidential Mission. Following the arrival of the Governor and his aides, thousands of individuals from across Latin America penned letters, offering advice to Rockefeller or soliciting aid for a dizzying array of concerns both private and public. These demonstrate a nuanced understanding of these individuals' place within the Cold War political matrix as well as a desire to impact broader historical processes.

During the summer of 2009, my research in the Countries Series focused on Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. This research illustrated a distinct difference between the Mexican and Central American letters, on the one hand, and the South American and Caribbean letters on the other. In essence, fewer solicitations exist for the Central American nations and those that do exist tend to shy away from the volatility of letters arriving from South American countries, particularly the Argentine and Brazilian letters that I reviewed previously and, to a lesser degree, the Uruguayan letters that I considered during this trip. Besides domestic concerns (Central America having been less volatile in the 1960s than South America) this suggests that the momentum of the presidential missions not only bred discord in the streets but also continued in the correspondence that followed the mission's visits. That is to say, the very violence that erupted during the later stages of the Central American visit, but would rise to extreme levels during the following three visits to South America and the Caribbean, helped to propel these correspondents.

1969 Presidential Mission General Report (RG III, 4 O, Subseries 8)

This is by far the most extensive series concerning the Latin American mission and, after the Countries Series, perhaps the most illuminating. The material reveals the process of creating background summaries and briefing books on each country visited, personal meetings with various think-tanks prior to Governor Rockefeller's trips, reams of correspondence to organize each visit, as well as multiple drafts of the final report.

During this visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center, my research in this subseries largely focused upon the preparation for the trip, country briefings, the reports of advance-men, and especially the regular internal briefings from Rockefeller's entourage as well as a series of meetings that sought to draft the principles that would drive the final report. Of particular interest were the meetings in Asunción and in Haiti where the basic shape of the report was determined. I was particularly struck by the dissenting voices of figures like Leroy Wehrle, then a Harvard University fellow, whose worry about the tendency of U.S. policy makers to flatten the situation on the ground led him to insist upon the possibility of writing personal pieces that broke with the report's main recommendations while still preparing the report, a position that only he and Jerome Levinson took advantage of in the aftermath of the report's appearance.

My research in the country reports and schedules helped to clarify my sense of which local actors met with the various delegates. This should enable future research on the origins of the opinions communicated in the report by cross-referencing these names which encompassed figures from business, diplomacy, the arts, the military, and student organizations. I was also able to watch stock footage of Rockefeller's first visit to Mexico and Central America, which demonstrated the slow unraveling of the scripted visits with which the mission began. This includes footage of the

Governor and his wife Happy visiting with dignitaries, hospitals and charities in Mexico, footage of his arrival and welcoming speech at tarmacs across Central America, and isolated shots of a small student demonstration in Costa Rica that featured the ubiquitous burning tires and effigies that would become so much more expansive and violent later on. This appears to have been material for a planned documentary that was scrapped following the violence that ensued.

Future Steps

As I mentioned in my previous Grant-in-Aid Report, the materials found in the Rockefeller Archive Center demonstrate the importance of Nelson Rockefeller's 1969 Presidential Mission to Latin America to the broader history of the Cold War in the region and also indicate a lost opportunity for potential aperture and better hemispheric understanding. However, they also can be read as an indicator of the severe cleavages that existed within Latin American society and for which Rockefeller acted as a barometer. While the materials in the Countries Series can help illustrate the complexity of these relations, further research into periodical coverage and local circumstances is needed to fully flesh out these relations. There is a particular gap in the Rockefeller Archive Center's materials on the student movement and the left which is not surprising given the politicization of the trip and the antipathy these groups showed toward Rockefeller.

I am currently applying for extramural funding to conduct such research by reviewing periodicals at major collections in the United States along with targeted research trips to specific countries. I have already visited Argentina and Brazil in this regard, and hope to conduct further research not only in these countries but also in Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico over the next two years, with a goal of completing a book manuscript on the trip within three years.

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent. Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research. The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES

1. See Ernesto Capello, "Writing the Gringo Patrón: Popular Responses to Nelson Rockefeller's 1969 Presidential Mission to Latin America," Grant-in-Aid Report 2008 for more information on my first forays to the archive. Note also that there is some overlap between that report and this one.

2. Joseph E. Persico, *The Imperial Rockefeller: A Political Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982, p. 102.

3. Gerald Colby with Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will be Done, the Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, pp. 630-642.

4. See James Petras, *Politics and Social Structure in Latin America*. New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1970, especially Chapter 3, and Peter Bales, "Nelson Rockefeller and His Quest for Inter-American Unity." Ph.D. Dissertation, SUNY at Stony Brook, 1992.

5. See below for an annotated breakdown of the relevant series.

6. See Nelson A. Rockefeller, *The Rockefeller Report on the Americas: The Official Report of a United States Presidential Mission for the Western Hemisphere*. Chicago, Illinois: Quadrangle Books, 1969.

7. A similar array of appeals to John D. Rockefeller from Americans down on their luck has been analyzed by Scott A. Sandage, in *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 205. See especially Chapter 8, "Big Business and Little Men."