THE FIFTH PAN AMERICAN CONFERENCE:
PROVING GROUND FOR WARREN G. HARDING’S
LATIN AMERICAN POLICY

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President Warren G. Harding and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes sought to promote friendship with Latin America, and endeavored to reverse the long trend of interventions which had characterized United States relations with that area of the globe through the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson. Harding and Hughes sought stability in Latin America, but proposed to attain this by peaceful means. The United States would continue to act as “big brother” to the Latins, but would rely on diplomatic persuasion and calm counseling instead of force. In this way, with the exercise of a little patience, the desired objectives could be achieved without the expense and ill feeling involved in armed intervention. Harding and Hughes perceived that stability would facilitate American financial penetration far more effectively than military occupation, and hopefully would also terminate the frequent disputes that inevitably entangled the United States. The Harding administration avoided sending troops to Latin America, and by the time the Fifth Pan American Conference assembled in Santiago, Chile in March, 1923, had completed arrangements for the withdrawal of the troops from the Dominican Republic, recalled the detachment from Cuba, and turned most police duties in Haiti over to a native constabulary.¹

The President went to considerable lengths to demonstrate his cordial feelings toward Latin America. For example, in May, 1921, he attended a Pan American Union reception honoring the Foreign Minister of Venezuela, a gesture which impressed Latin diplomats. Harding also opened a personal correspondence with President Arturo Alessandri of Chile, after Alessandri, in congratulating Harding on his inauguration, commented upon their common affiliation with the Masonic order. Immediately recognizing the opportun-


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portunity, Harding responded in a letter addressed to "My dear and worthy brother Alessandri," stressing their union in "fraternal friendship." Although the succeeding missives seldom touched on important questions, they did promote understanding, especially in view of Latin personali-smo. This correspondence may well have influenced Chile’s decision to accept arbitration of the Tacna–Arica dispute by Harding. To further demonstrate United States’ friendship, the President dispatched Hughes to the inaugural session of the Brazilian Centennial exposition of 1922 in Rio de Janeiro. Harding and Hughes went beyond declamations, and endeavored to demonstrate their sincerity through actions. Instead of dispatching troops to Cuba under the Platt Amendment they relied on General Enoch Crowder, using political rather than military intervention. In addition to the troop withdrawals previously cited, Harding devoted considerable effort to securing Senate approval of the treaty returning the Isle of Pines to Cuba, and also persuaded the Senate to give its advice and consent to the accord compensating Colombia for the seizure of Panama. Both of these agreements had been previously rejected by the Legislature, and their approval removed longstanding grievances that had served as festering sores stimulating resentment in Latin America.

Harding also wished the United States to assume an active peacemaking role in settling disputes between Latin American states. His offer to arbitrate the Tacna–Arica controversy is the best known example, but was not his only effort. In 1922, during an informal visit to the White House, President-elect Pedro Nel Ospina of Colombia requested American aid in reopening diplomatic relations with Panama. Harding enthusiastically wrote Hughes: "I realize very well that this is none of our affair... However, so long as we play the role of big brother, I suppose we shall have errands of this sort to perform." The President suggested: "perhaps our Minister in Panama might make informal and wholly discreet inquiry as to diplomatic representation in Colombia. Please
note that I make no suggestion of formal proceedings. If we can discreetly and helpfully broach the subject . . . it would be a wholly becoming thing to do." Hughes proved reticent, but eventually mediation was undertaken. This incident provided a clear illustration of Harding's technique. As a practical politician, he realized the value of informal and friendly exchange, and was accustomed to working tactfully and discreetly, without a formal commitment. While the President was a neophyte in the field of foreign policy, and was unacquainted with the diplomatic background of the questions, his political training had provided him with a thorough understanding of the methods involved. Harding was well aware of his limitation, and constantly badgered the State Department for position papers and background memoranda. When presented with the full particulars of a question, he had no difficulty perceiving the proper course, and recognized sound advice when it was provided. To facilitate their policies, Harding and Hughes sought able diplomats to represent the United States in Latin America. They carefully selected career envoys for the most sensitive posts, and the Chief Executive found other positions for political nominees, contrary to the image normally presented in standard texts.

The Fifth Pan American Conference took place, therefore, during a period of improving relations between Latin America and the United States. Inevitably, such an assemblage of diplomats from throughout the hemisphere would provide both a barometer to measure the success of previous administration policy innovations, and a vehicle useful in advancing the administration's principal objective in the region—improving the diplomatic atmosphere by dissipating mistrust of the Colossus of the North. Harding and Hughes shrewdly perceived that such a conference could effectively contribute to a transformation of the milieu of inter-American relations, rather than serving as a forum for political settlement.

Selection of the American representatives was crucial. Hughes was "a little anxious about commitments that may be made at the White House," for the President was under "very great pressure"

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7. There are many items in the Harding papers and State Department papers indicating that the President requested such memoranda. See for example Hughes to Harding, November 17, 1921, United States Department Papers, National Archives, RG 59, 813.00/1145a, in which Hughes transmitted a memorandum to the President "in accordance with your request." Hereinafter State Department Papers will be cited by slash number only.
8. The Harding image has been considerably distorted in standard historical texts, and considerable revisionism is presently underway, using the information revealed by his papers. The outstanding example to date which indicates the erroneouness of the standard Harding image, and reveals prudence in the appointments to many positions, is Robert K. Murray, The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and his Administration, (Minneapolis, 1969).
from Senators “anxious to have constituents appointed,” but the
delegation was carefully chosen. The President named Henry P.
Fletcher as chairman. Although Fletcher was then serving as ambas-
sassador to Belgium, he possessed extensive experience in and
was widely known in Latin America, and had formerly served in
the host country. A close friend of the President, Fletcher had
served as Undersecretary of State throughout the first year of
the administration, during which he was “a full member of the
golf cabinet.” Fletcher’s appointment was acclaimed by the Amer-
ican and Latin American press, and the President of Paraguay
told the American minister in Asunción that: “He was particu-
larly pleased with the selection of Mr. Fletcher, who from long
experience with Latin temperament, will be able to accomplish
more than any other person.” The selection of Dr. Leo S. Rowe,
Director of the Pan American Union, provided the American dele-
gation with another individual knowledgeable about and well known
in Latin America. George E. Vincent, head of the Rockefeller
Foundation, and Frank C. Partridge, a former minister to Ven-
ezuela, were also chosen. Contrary to the usual image of Harding,
the Chief Executive side-stepped pressures from legislators in
behalf of constituents, by selecting two Senators, Frank B. Kel-
logg of Minnesota, a Republican, and Atlee Pomerene of Ohio, a
Democrat. Former Senator Saulsbury of Delaware and Washing-
ton attorney William E. Fowler completed the list. By selecting
Senators, Harding assured support for the ratification of any
agreements. The delegation thus represented an astute compro-
mise between ability and political expediency. Harding correctly
discerned that Fletcher, by virtue of his experience and friend-
ship with both the Chief Executive and the Secretary, would dom-
inate the delegation.

There was considerable speculation that the Secretary of State
would attend the conference and Harding strongly urged him to
make an appearance. The President viewed this as a means of
dramatizing American friendship for Latin America, and when
Hughes proved reluctant, Harding placed considerable pressure
upon him. As early as November 28, 1922, he wrote the Secretary:
“If the circumstances are such that you can arrange to go and

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9 Dr. Leo S. Rowe to Henry P. Fletcher, November 10, 1922, Box 9, Papers of Henry
P. Fletcher, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; and Rowe to Fletcher, Janu-
ary 15, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10.
10 Hughes to Fletcher, January 5, 1923, State Department Papers, 710 E. 002/2a;
Hughes to Harding, January 6, 1923, and Harding to Hughes, January 6, 1923, 710
E. 002/3; Fletcher to Harding, January 10, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10, Fletcher
to Hughes, January 10, 1923, Hughes Papers, Box 21, and New York Times, March 4,
1923.
11 New York Times, March 4, 1923; and William J. O’Toole (United States Minister
in Paraguay) to Hughes, February 12, 1923, reporting the remarks of President Ayala,
710 E. 002/85.
12 Hughes to Fletcher, January 31, 1923, 710 E. 002/161.
open the conference I think it would be an exceedingly fine thing to do. . . . I think the benefits accruing from your visit to Brazil might be duplicated by a visit to Chile. I should be happy to promote such visits on your part as will tend to enhance our relations with South American states.” The Secretary however, had no desire to attend the conference, since he regarded Pan American Conclaves as mere “friendship festivals.” While assuring the Chief Executive that he would “do all in my power to aid our Latin American relations,” he continued: “I confess . . . that I have no love whatever for speachmaking trips.” Harding replied that he would discuss the matter with Hughes personally, indicating that he still favored an appearance by the Secretary. Obviously, Harding was far more aware of the value of personal diplomacy than was Hughes, and in this sense the President was ahead of his time.

Hughes yielded to Harding’s admonitions, and accepted a Chilean invitation to attend the inaugural session of the conference, but reversed himself at the last moment, citing the “press of work” in Washington, and ignoring renewed appeals from Harding. The Secretary’s action appears particularly regrettable in view of his success at the Sixth Pan American Conference in 1928, and in this context Harding was certainly perceptive in urging Hughes to attend the Santiago conclave. Yet, in retrospect, perhaps the absence of Hughes benefited the United States, for the appointment of Fletcher assured American success at Santiago. With his knowledge of Latin temperament, Fletcher was more subtle and less committed to rigid legalism than the Secretary, and consequently was able to secure American ends more tactfully, remaining pliant, stressing cooperation, and exuding friendship. This was the very embodiment of the tactics Harding advocated and hoped to make the basis of hemispheric understanding.

Problems began before the conference convened, as Mexico declined the invitation, citing the fact that its dispute with the United States denied it representation on the governing board of the Pan American Union, which prepared the conference agenda. That body’s membership was limited to the representatives of the respective states in Washington, and diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico remained severed. While Chile invited Mexico to the conference, the Mexicans considered it beneath

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13 Harding to Hughes, November 28, 1922, Harding Papers, Box 361.
15 Hughes to Harding, November 28, 1922, Hughes to Harding, December 1, 1922, and Harding to Hughes, December 1, 1922. Harding Papers, Box 361.
16 Hughes to Fletcher, January 5, 1923, 710 E. 002/20; New York Times, January 14, 1921, January 31, 1921, February 27, 1923, March 4, 1923, and William Miller Collier (United States Ambassador in Chile) to Hughes, March 3, 1923, 710 E. 022/66.
their dignity to attend after being unable to contribute to the agenda, and charged that the Yankees were deliberately seeking to exclude them. When Chile and Brazil informed Washington that they desired Mexican participation, Hughes replied that although the United States did not object to the presence of Mexico at the Santiago conference, and despite continuing negotiations with Mexico, “It would be quite impossible for this Government to enter into treaties with a government which has not been recognized.” Hughes’ inflexible stand forced the Latins to choose between Mexico and the United States, but this caused little difficulty in view of Mexican intransigence.

The governments of Peru and Bolivia also abstained from participating in the conference. These nations feared that the conclave might attempt to compel them to accept some settlement of the Tacna–Arica dispute, and also objected to a meeting in the capital of the nation which they felt had committed a transgression.

When the conference convened on March 25, 1923, Ambassador Fletcher immediately became the focal point. Chilean crowds lining the streets cheered him as he passed through the city, and delegates applauded when he entered the inaugural session. Senator Pomerene was awed by the “most flattering ovation” Fletcher received, and wrote Hughes: “You have named the right man for chairman of our delegation.” Chilean President Arturo Alessandri, who opened the conclave, presented the original manuscript of his keynote address to Fletcher, a gesture which clearly demonstrated both the ambassador’s popularity with Latin diplomats and the success of Harding’s policies.

The chairman of the American delegation deftly worked to secure maximum benefits for the United States, without ruffling Latin feelings. Fletcher needed all his diplomatic skill to blunt the vestiges of suspicion of the United States, since the conference agenda was studded with political topics, which appeared in greater profusion than at previous Pan American conferences. Debate on any one of these controversial questions could become anti-American, and the chairman of the American delegation was compelled to oppose some of the aspirations of the Latin diplomats which clashed with American policy. Fletcher had to simultaneously promote good will and defend his country’s interests.

Realizing that the Latins would raise the question which had kept Mexico from the conference, Dr. Leo S. Rowe Director of the Pan American Union, offered a proposal to broaden the pow-

37 New York Times, January 13, 1923, and Hughes to Fletcher, March 5, 1923, Hughes Papers, Box 21.
39 Atlee Pomerene to Hughes, March 28, 1923, 710 W. 002/89; and Fletcher to Arturo Alessandri, April 5, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10.
ers of the Union, and permit it to consider political questions. Costa Rica proposed a board composed of delegates accredited directly to the Union, to enable a government denied United States recognition to retain its representation. Most of the Latin American nations supported this plan. The resulting compromise sanctioned appointment of a special representative by any government that so elected, accepted Rowe's proposals, and also provided for an elected board chairman, terminating the automatic appointment of the American Secretary of State; though the practice of electing the Secretary continued.20

Given Latin American membership in the League of Nations, questions relating to the world body were implicit throughout the conference. Agustín Edwards, a Chilean diplomat then serving as President of the League of Nations, was elected President of the Pan American Conference. Edwards saw no conflict in this dual post, contending that the League had promoted Pan American solidarity by bringing the Latin nations together in a voting block at the world body.21 Yet such parallels raised suspicions in the United States, due to the passionate feelings aroused by the dispute over League membership. The New York Times commented satirically that the discussion of “League plans” at Santiago “will compel the State Department to admit that the League of Nations exists, or else walk out of the conference. If our delegates walk out,” the Times continued, “Pan American harmony will have been destroyed; if they admit that there is a League of Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge will be stultified, and Heaven knows what harm may happen to the Republic.”22

In accordance with a suggestion by Uruguayan President Dr. Baltasar Brum some three years earlier, several delegations advocated the formation of an American League of Nations.23 The proposed Charter contained a provision continentalizing the Monroe Doctrine that caused considerable debate. Dr. Brum advocated Latin support for the Doctrine, in order to transform it into a multi-lateral instrument, which would be enforceable jointly, but the United States steadfastly insisted that the Monroe Doctrine must remain a unilateral policy.24 Although the proposal died in the face of determined opposition by the United States, the fact that the American delegation had not prevented discussion of the idea was significant. A Costa Rican suggestion for an all American Court of Justice, raised another question the United States

20 New York Times, April 5, April 10, April 17, and April 19, 1923.
preferred to avoid, but the Latins themselves were by no means agreed on the establishment of a court, and the proposal was deferred.25

Arms limitation provided an additional perplexing issue. The futility of seeking agreement on limitation of ground forces was readily apparent, and discussion was restricted to naval limitation, following the example of the Washington Disarmament Conference. Naval limitation, in turn, hinged on agreement between Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, which possessed the largest fleets. But the A.B.C. countries deadlocked, and the only result was an agreement to continued talks between them.26

The outstanding development of the Fifth Pan American Conference that resulted in a concrete agreement was the adoption of the Treaty to Avoid or Prevent Conflicts between the American States, also known as the Gondra Treaty, after its sponsor, Dr. Manual Gondra of Paraguay. The signatories pledged to submit all outstanding disputes to an International Commission of Inquiry, which would tender a report after a six month study. While the decision would not be binding, the respective states would be required to refrain from initiating war preparations during the investigation and the succeeding six months.27 Thus the treaty functioned in the same manner as the Bryan "cooling off" treaties, merely multilateralizing the process. The plan assumed that postponing hostilities would prevent their outbreak by allowing time for negotiations. Presumably the other American states would apply pressure for a settlement during the interim, although the treaty did not commit them to do so.

The delegates also codified a number of technical matters. A convention providing for publication of passport regulations and standardization of forms to facilitate intercourse among the several states was approved. Another agreement established standard nomenclature for commercial shipping of merchandise, to stimulate trade. The conference also approved a convention providing reciprocal protection for copyrights, trademarks, and commercial names.28

Fletcher's ability to uphold American policy in a subtle manner drew praise when the conference adjourned May 3, 1923. Dr. Rowe hailed "the masterly way in which you have handled the work of the Delegation," while Senator Pomerene wrote Harding: "You

26 Washington Post, April 7, 1923, and New York Times, April 12, April 18, and April 19, 1923. See also Current History, XVIII (1923), pp. 924-925.
made a ten strike in naming Ambassador Fletcher as chairman of this Delegation. He is very popular here among the Chileans and all South Americans.\textsuperscript{29}

From the viewpoint of the Harding administration, the conference was a resounding success. A change in atmosphere was the key objective, and the United States delegation attempted to exude good will and allow the Latins to feel free to express their views. Despite the fact that Fletcher became the focus of attention at the conclave, he nevertheless refrained from commenting on the questions under consideration until the Latin delegates had stated their positions. This change in the role of the United States delegation constituted the pivotal factor in setting the mood of the conference. As a result, in the words of one observer, for “the first time in the history of these conferences . . . the Latin Americans felt they could freely speak their minds.” So successful was the American delegation at cultivating good will and listening to Latin views, that domestic press criticism of the conclave was answered from Latin America. Taking exception to a New York \textit{Evening Post} editorial criticizing the defense of the Monroe Doctrine as “imperialism,” \textit{El Mercurio} of Santiago replied: “The North American delegation observed such a deferential and respectful attitude toward all the other republics that without a doubt they succeeded in convincing all the delegations that the United States does not follow an imperialistic policy, nor seek to impose its policies, but seeks harmony of interests, and cordiality founded on mutual respect and equality of treatment.”\textsuperscript{31} Such a comment would scarcely have been possible at earlier Pan American conclaves, and it reflected the success of the Harding policy.

Fletcher reported to President Harding and Secretary Hughes that: “The frank, free, full discussions had made the conference a success as far as the establishment of better and more friendly relations among the American nations was concerned.”\textsuperscript{32} The Americans did not go to Santiago seeking any spectacular agreements. The Harding administration desired only to dissipate the residue of ill feeling that remained from previous American actions, and create a new spirit to facilitate mutual understanding. Withdrawing objections to the discussion of political issues was one way to show the new policy of friendship, but this did not mean sanctioning the policies. The Americans desired only an airing of views. That they succeeded in obtaining this without an excessive

\textsuperscript{29} Alessandri to Fletcher, May 7, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10; Rowe to Fletcher, May 3, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10; and Pomerene to Harding, May 4, 1923, Fletcher Papers, Box 10.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Current History}, XVII (1923), p. 923.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{El Mercurio} (Santiago), August 22, 1923.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{New York Times}, June 2, 1923.
amount of anti-American tirades, was certainly an accomplishment.

If the results of the conference appear somewhat limited at first glance, this is because the item of greatest significance, the change in atmosphere, could not be recorded in an agreement. The New York Times noted editorially that the results would disappoint the idealists but cheer the realists. Discussion of numerous political questions represented a significant step along the road of Pan Americanism, and although the resulting disputes could not be resolved, the airing of the controversial issues was an important transition. The accomplishments of the conference were more extensive than the treaties indicate.

The Harding administration thus secured its ends at the Fifth Pan American Conference, and this accomplishment indicated the skill with which it pursued its goals. Harding shrewdly focused upon realistic objectives, and prudently selected a delegation chairman whose skill matched his objectives. The combination of careful advance preparation and able representatives brought success for Harding's practical common sense approach to diplomacy. Thus the Fifth Pan American Conference both contributed to his objectives and demonstrated the success of his policies.

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