

Introduction

After the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States became a world power. The country began to look as far away as China for new markets and resources. Closer to home, the United States also continued its effort to end any European interference in North America and **Latin America**—those nations in Central America, the Caribbean Sea, and in South America.

Spheres of Influence in China

Although Americans had been trading with the Chinese since 1790, it was not until the late 1800s that the United States took an active role in the political affairs of China.

In the late 1890s, the European nations of Great Britain, France, and Germany divided valuable areas of China among themselves. Because China could not defend itself, each country was able to develop **spheres of influence** in that country. A sphere of influence refers to a geographic area controlled by a country and used for its benefit. The United States feared that the spheres of influence of other countries would prevent Americans from expanding their own trade in China. Unless the United States took action, other countries would have complete control of the markets and resources in China.



Chinese teapot

The Open Door Policy

In 1900 the United States Secretary of State *John Hay* sent messages to Great Britain, France, Germany, and other European nations. He asked them to follow an **Open Door Policy** within their spheres of influence. This policy would permit other countries, especially the United States, to have an “open door” to trade in China.

The Boxer Rebellion

The Chinese did not benefit from the Western nations’ spheres of influence. Consequently, some Chinese took up arms against these intruding countries. A Chinese secret society, which the Westerners called

the *Boxers*, tried to force foreigners out of China. This outbreak was called the **Boxer Rebellion**. Armies and Navies from the Western countries fought and defeated the Boxers. The fighting, which lasted about seven months, ended in 1901.

Western nations were angry about the Boxer Rebellion, and some of them talked of taking over all of China to prevent another rebellion. However, Secretary Hay wanted to preserve, or keep, China an independent nation. He helped persuade China's government to punish the Boxers and pay for the damage to Western interests and to avoid any further action by the Western nations.

The payment to the United States more than covered its cost in ending the Boxer Rebellions. The money the United States returned to China was used to send college students from China to study in the United States. This exchange between these countries improved their relationship.

President Theodore Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs

By 1900 the United States had its own **empire** and controlled other nations as colonies. It now could expand its trade around the world. To protect its new territories and trading ships, the United States needed a strong naval force in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

In 1895 the United States began to build its **Great White Fleet**, a naval force of armor-plated ships.

In 1907 President *Theodore Roosevelt* sent this newer and larger navy to patrol both oceans and

show other nations that the United States was now a sea power that could protect its territories and interests abroad.



President Theodore Roosevelt

Panama Canal

In those days, a ship traveling from New York on the Atlantic coast to San Francisco on the Pacific coast had to sail all the way around South America. The United States wanted its navy to be able to make the trip from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean more quickly. The solution would be to find a shortcut between the two oceans. This idea had been considered by other nations.

For 20 years French engineers had been digging a canal, a manmade waterway, across Central America. They had failed because of the high cost of building the canal. Also, diseases like **yellow fever** and **malaria** killed many workers. President Roosevelt saw an opportunity for the United States to complete the canal, and in 1902, he purchased the canal rights from France for \$40 million.

Panama was a state in Colombia, and the **Panama Canal** route was actually owned by the Colombian government. The United States tried to purchase the land from Colombia, but the Colombian government rejected the offer. Many Panamanians supported the United States plan and **revolted**, or began to fight or rebel, against Colombia. With the help of the United States Navy, Panama defeated Colombia and gained its independence. Panama quickly made a treaty on November 18, 1903, with the United States and leased, or rented, the Panama Canal route to the United States for \$10 million and an annual fee of \$250,000. In 1904 American engineers began to build the Panama Canal.



Americans faced the same problems with yellow fever and malaria as had France. American doctors soon found that these diseases were carried by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes could be controlled by draining the swamps so they could not breed. Screens over doors and windows kept the insect out of homes. Within two years, most of Panama was free of yellow fever and malaria, and construction on the Panama Canal could be finished.

The Panama Canal, 50 miles long, was finished in 1914 and opened to traffic to all nations. The United States controlled and protected the Panama Canal and built a naval base in the **Canal Zone**. The Panama Canal shortened the trip from New York to San Francisco from 13,000 miles to only 5,000 miles. The canal helped the United States maintain and increase its power in Latin America—Mexico, Central America, and South America—and the Caribbean.



The Panama Canal was the world's greatest engineering feat. The United States completed the project in 10 years, and the first steamer went through in August 1914.

Courtesy of the J.N. "Ding" Darling Foundation

Eventually, the United States controlled the entire Caribbean Sea. Americans believed this region was important to the security and trade of their country.

Two treaties were agreed upon between the Republic of Panama and the United States in 1977. The treaties were ratified by both countries in 1978 and on October 1, 1979, the United States returned the legal rights of the Canal Zone to Panama. The United States government felt the canal rightly belonged to Panama. Under the treaty, the United States maintained operational control until December 31, 1999. Today traffic from all nations continue to use the Panama Canal.

The Roosevelt Corollary

In 1904 President Theodore Roosevelt announced that no other country but the United States could interfere in the affairs of Latin America. The United States would act like a police officer in this region. This declaration was known as the **Roosevelt Corollary**. (A *corollary* is a natural result of an action.) In a speech referring to Latin America, Roosevelt made his famous statement: “Speak softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far.”

Roosevelt had three reasons why he wanted the United States to act as a police officer in Latin America. First, the United States wanted to protect the Panama Canal. Second, the United States wanted to protect American business and property in Latin America. And third, the United States wanted to end European interference in the Western Hemisphere.

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3. The United States wanted to end European interference in the Western Hemisphere.

The United States Takes Action in Latin America

From 1905 to 1933, various problems occurred in Latin America. These problems usually were the result of disagreements about money or battles for control of Latin American governments. In 1912 President *William Taft* sent the United States Marines into



President William Taft

Nicaragua to end the fighting there. The American government also sent troops at one time or another to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Honduras.

The United States built schools, hospitals, and highways in different Latin American countries. These improvements were made mainly to improve and protect American businesses in these countries. Critics of President Taft's efforts to protect American investments in Latin America called these actions **dollar diplomacy** because the United States was using money (dollars) to buy good will.



President Woodrow Wilson

In 1912 the United States elected a new President—*Woodrow Wilson*. His first **foreign policy** test came in Mexico in 1914. Mexico was controlled by the dictator Victoriano Huerta, who threatened to confiscate, or take, American-owned property in Mexico. On two occasions, Wilson sent American troops into Mexico to protect Americans and their property. When Huerta retired and the new government assured Wilson that America's people and property would be respected, the United States withdrew its military forces.

In spite of this agreement between Mexico and the United States, many Latin Americans feared the power of the United States. They felt that their northern neighbor was gaining too much control in the region. Tensions between the United States and Latin America remained high after World War I ended in 1918.

In 1933 President *Franklin D. Roosevelt* tried to improve relations between the United States and Latin America. He did not want to use American troops to solve Latin American problems. Instead, he wanted to treat his Latin American neighbors with greater respect. He called this approach the **Good Neighbor Policy**. The United States and Latin American nations signed an agreement that the United States would remove their troops and not send more troops into any Latin American country. They also signed an agreement to lower tariffs, or taxes on imports, and increase trade. These actions improved relations between the United States and Latin America.



President Franklin Roosevelt

Summary

By the early 20th century, the United States had become a world power. Its navy had become the second largest in the world, and it had gained a sphere of influence in China. Closer to home, the United States had gained control of Latin America and the Caribbean. Its new world status, or position, came just as World War I began.