

## Debating the origins of American interventionism

Most historians would agree that the United States acted in an imperial manner towards Latin America. They disagree, though, on why this was the case. In broad terms, the explanations can be categorized into three groups, each stressing the pre-eminence of economic, security or ideological factors.

For those historians who emphasize economic considerations, the Monroe Doctrine and interventionism in Latin America are largely efforts to secure access to raw materials and markets to assure the growth of the American economy (for example, William A. Williams and Walter Lafeber). Others, like Lester D. Langley or David Healy, have stressed the primacy of national security considerations by pointing to American concerns over German expansionist designs. In the first decades of the twentieth century this new rivalry was particularly evident in the competition over the control of the Panama Canal and was heightened by the emphasis on naval power and the perceived need to establish bases to protect US interests. One should stress, though, that the two explanations often overlap: American economic interests were, often, perceived as central in national security strategy.

The third broad explanation for the growth and maintenance of US influence in Latin America stresses ideological factors. In this context, the debate and controversy – which extend throughout much of the history of American foreign policy – are about both the cause and impact of American policy. Originally, such historians as Samuel Bemis argued that the United States worked hard for the democratization of the Western Hemisphere; that much of American policy was driven by a missionary impulse; and, while the end results were not always what had been intended, the intentions were idealistic and well meaning.

Since the 1960s the 'democratization' school has been discredited. In explaining the persistent support for various dictatorial regimes, these historians point to the essentially racist outlook of much of American society and the assumption, held by many, that the people living in countries south of the United States were simply not ready for democracy. American dominance of the hemisphere was, thus, justified by a social Darwinist outlook that placed the 'Latinos' below the 'Whites' and was, by and large, reflected in the nature of American society (see Michael Hunt, *Ideology and American Foreign Policy*, New Haven, CT, 1987).

In short, the debate over the nature of inter-American relations – and US foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere in particular – offers an array of explanations and theories that touch upon the essence of American foreign policy. Exploring the debate will improve one's understanding not only of the inter-American relationship but also of the American role in the world throughout the twentieth century and beyond.