



Photo by Tino Soriano

## IMMIGRATION

A man stands next to murals in San Francisco's Mission District.

# Latino Migration and U.S. Foreign Policy

by Lisa García Bedolla

Immigration, particularly Latino migration, has become a hot topic in American politics. In popular discourse, immigration is described as a personal decision made by an individual or family, with little consideration of the macroeconomic context that influences that decision. One important and often overlooked structural constraint related to immigration patterns is U.S. political and economic involvement in the country of origin. This involvement is critically important for understanding Latino migration flows to the United States.

U.S. engagement with Latin America has a long history, and it has assumed a different character in different regions. Many Latin American migrants worked for U.S. companies in their home countries. Many were directly recruited by those companies to come to the United States, and those companies often lobbied the U.S. Congress to ensure continued migration flows. The economic development policies pursued by Latin American governments — and therefore the economic opportunities available to their populations — were often strongly influenced by the U.S. government and financial sector. During the cold war, U.S. strategic concerns and levels of military aid also affected

the ability of social movements to redistribute wealth in these countries. Thus, the way in which the United States expressed its political and economic interests in the region affected Latin Americans' economic and political situation on the ground, the facility with which they were able to migrate to the United States and the legal terms by which they were accepted under U.S. immigration policy.

The United States' relations with Latin America have been deeply influenced by two important U.S. principles: manifest destiny and the Monroe Doctrine. The idea of manifest destiny — that the United States was “destined” to be an Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation stretching from coast to coast — had its roots in colonial political thought. Since the colonial period, many Americans have believed that it was God's will that the United States should control the North American territory and that the nation needed to be based on a common set of political ideals, religious beliefs and cultural practices. Over time, the idea that it was the United States' destiny to control a particular geographic sphere would expand beyond the North American continent and extend across the Western Hemisphere through the Monroe Doctrine.

John Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, developed the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, when he was President James Monroe's secretary of state. Formulated when many Latin American countries were fighting to gain independence from the imperial European powers, the doctrine sought to ensure that Europe did not re-colonize the Western Hemisphere. In his State of the Union message in December of that year, President Monroe declared that the United States would not interfere in European wars or internal affairs. Likewise, he expected Europe to stay out of the affairs of the New World. European attempts to interfere in the Americas would be interpreted by the United States as threats to its "peace and safety."

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt added the "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, which defined U.S. intervention in Latin American domestic affairs as necessary for national security:

All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. 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.

This corollary was used to justify U.S. intervention in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. It was officially reversed in 1934 with the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "good neighbor" policy towards Latin America. Nonetheless, the principle that the United States' political and economic interests are intimately related to that of Latin America remained. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States' economic interests played a central role in

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A McKinley-Roosevelt campaign poster from 1900 claims a humanitarian motive for Latin American intervention.



Image from Wikimedia.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Bain News Service Collection.

Porfirio Díaz at the festival celebrating 100 years of Mexican independence, 1910.

the development of Latin American banking, infrastructure and industry. Similarly, the U.S. government, particularly after the start of the cold war, continued to intervene in Latin American governmental and military affairs. This, in turn, has had important effects on the timing and make-up of Latin American migration to the United States.

## Mexico

Mexican-Americans constitute the largest Latino group in the United States, making up two-thirds of the total Latino population, and have been present in the Southwest since that region was a part of Mexico. One aspect of Mexican migration that is not often emphasized is its relationship with U.S. economic and political interests, both in Mexico and the United States.

During the Porfiriato (1876-1911), Porfirio Díaz oversaw a massive restructuring of the Mexican economy. Many of these economic changes were funded by U.S. companies, leading to significant U.S. involvement in the Mexican economy. By 1900, U.S. companies owned 80 percent of Mexican railroads, 75 percent of

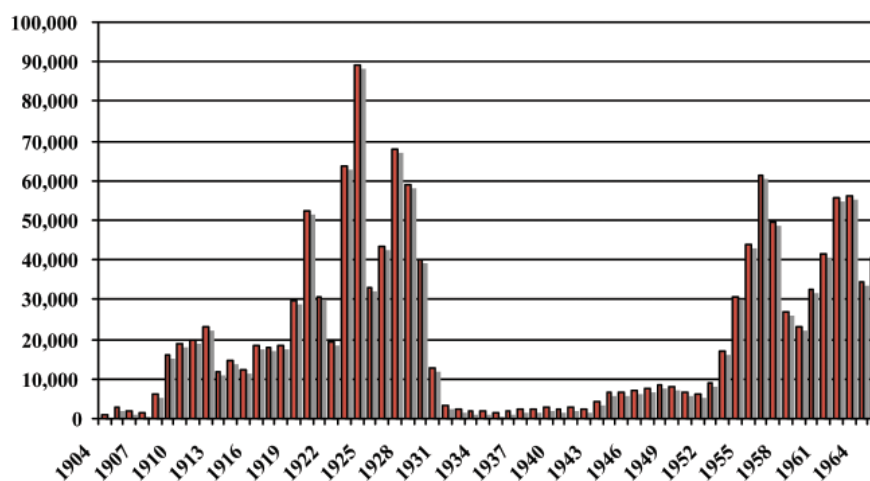
mining and 50 percent of oil fields. In addition, during the Porfiriato, an estimated 300,000 displaced Mexican peasants migrated from southern to northern Mexico to find work. From there, it was only a short step to the United States.

Most accounts of Mexican migration to the United States argue that it was the social upheaval caused by the Mexican Revolution, a bloody conflict which occurred from 1910 to 1920, that led to the first major wave of Mexican migration to the United States. While the Mexican

Revolution unquestionably played a key role, a closer examination of the number of yearly arrivals after the turn of the century reveals that Mexican migration to the United States began to increase in 1908 and grew significantly in 1909 and 1910, before the revolution had taken root (see Table 1). Similarly, migration levels continued to grow throughout the 1920s, despite the reduced level of political violence in Mexico.

Thus, Mexican migration flows to the United States are at least in part explained by economic restructuring and U.S. involvement in Mexican economic development policy starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These factors initiated an internal migration process that in turn led to increasing movement from Mexico to the United States, a process that continues to the present day. This movement was facilitated both by the government and by business interests in the United States. U.S. companies regularly sent recruiters to Mexico to bring back workers, often paying for their transportation costs. Congress did its part by setting no limitations (until 1965) on the numbers of migrants who could enter the United States from the Western Hemisphere.

Table 1. Mexican Immigrants to the United States, 1904–1967



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 2006.



Photo by Jack Delano, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Puerto Rican cane cutters on their lunch break, 1941.

## Puerto Rico

The U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico since the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 has significantly affected the economy of the island and driven Puerto Rican migration to the United States. From the beginning, the U.S. government sought to “modernize” the Puerto Rican economy. In support of these modernization efforts, in 1947 the Puerto Rican legislature approved the Industrial Incentives Act, which provided tax breaks, low-cost labor and land to U.S. businesses to encourage them to move manufacturing to the island. U.S. government officials referred to this act as “Operation Bootstrap.” As a result, from 1958 to 1977, Puerto Rico experienced dramatic economic growth, averaging over 9 percent a year. Factory employment doubled during the same period, and the number of factories grew by about 20 percent. The industrialization also coincided with a dramatic decline in the agrarian sector. In 1950, 40 percent of the labor force worked on farms; by the late 1980s, that number had fallen to 3 percent. Thus, in a very short period of time, the Puerto

Rican economy was transformed from an agrarian-based system to an industrialized one.

This transformation led to significant social dislocations within Puerto Rican society, in particular to the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. The island’s dramatic rates of economic growth did little to affect employment levels. In fact, total employment in Puerto Rico actually decreased, from 603,000 jobs in 1951 to 543,000 in 1960; employment did not return to its 1951 levels until 1963. The growth in industrial jobs was unable to keep up with population growth or to compensate for job losses in the agricultural sector and home needlework industry.

What made the continuation of this program possible, despite high unemployment, was the unrestricted movement of Puerto Ricans to the United States. Because they are U.S. citizens (as a result of passage of the Jones Act in 1917), Puerto Ricans require no immigration documentation to migrate to the United States. As the island lost jobs, large numbers of Puerto Ricans began leaving the island and settling in the

United States, accelerating a process that began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An estimated 470,000 Puerto Ricans — 21 percent of the island’s population — emigrated in the 1950s in a movement which has become known as the Great Migration.

## Cuba

The United States also occupied Cuba after the Spanish-American War. U.S. troops were withdrawn in 1902 but not before the United States had forced the insertion of the Platt Amendment into the Cuban constitution. Twice rejected by the Cuban constitutional assembly, the amendment, which allowed for U.S. intervention in Cuba whenever the United States deemed it necessary, was finally passed when U.S. leaders made it clear that their soldiers would not leave the island until the amendment was adopted verbatim in the constitution.

It was not long before the United States felt the need to exercise its right of intervention. In response to a Cuban revolt in 1906, Teddy Roosevelt said:

I am so angry with that infernal little Cuban republic that I would like to wipe its people off the face of the earth. All we have wanted from them is that they would behave themselves and be prosperous and happy so that we would not have to interfere. And now, lo and behold, they have started an utterly unjustifiable and pointless revolution and may get things into such a snarl that we have no alternative save to intervene ...

The United States intervened and remained in the country until 1909. The U.S. intervened again in 1912 (staying until 1917) and 1922 and, in 1933, was instrumental in removing



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Bain News Service Collection.

American sailors march through Havana, circa 1910.

dictator Gerardo Machado. Although the Platt Amendment was rescinded in 1934, the United States remained deeply involved in Cuban economics and politics. As a result, by the late 1950s, the United States owned 90 percent of Cuban mines, 80 percent of public utilities, 50 percent of railways, 40 percent of sugar production and 25 percent of all bank deposits. Historian Terence Cannon argues that the United States did not fear the Cuban Revolution because it “owned” Cuba.

The Cuban Revolution led to the first mass migration of Cubans to the United States. Like Puerto Ricans, Cubans had been present in the U.S. since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but their numbers escalated dramatically as Cubans began fleeing the revolution in 1959. Since it was the height of the cold war, their presence was supported and encouraged by the U.S. government. Not only were Cuban immigrants given preferential treatment under the 1966 Cuban Refugee Act, they also received significant financial support — an estimated \$4 billion — from the U.S. government. To this day, Cubans are the only immigrant group given automatic residency upon arrival in the United States. That, of course, encourages Cuban migration and is a direct result of the symbolic role that opposition to the Castro regime plays within U.S. foreign policy.

## Central America

Central America’s proximity to the United States has long made it a target of U.S. political and economic interests.

In 1927, U.S. Undersecretary of State Robert Olds described how the United States understood its role in the region:

The Central American area constitutes a legitimate sphere of influence for the United States, if we are to have due regard for our own safety and protection... Our ministers accredited to the five little republics... have been advisors whose advice has been accepted virtually as law... we do control the destinies of Central America and we do so for the simple reason that the national interest dictates such a course... There is no room for any outside influence other than ours in this region... Until now Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those which we do not recognize and support fall.

The United States often expressed its support or opposition to these regimes through military action. The U.S. military invaded Nicaragua in 1894, 1896 and 1910 and occupied the country from 1912 to 1933. U.S. troops entered Honduras in 1903, 1907, 1911, 1912, 1919 and 1924, in most cases in response to internal conflict over electoral outcomes. The United States government was instrumental in engineering the secession of Panama from Colombia so as to be able to build the Panama Canal and was heavily involved in the country’s politics in order to ensure the canal’s function and defense. U.S. companies, particularly the United Fruit Company (now

Chiquita Banana), were also heavily invested in many Central American countries. United Fruit developed an integrated production plan, not only producing bananas but also building and controlling the infrastructure necessary to get them to market — including roads, railroads, utilities, ports and so on. In many Central American countries, United Fruit owned the majority of the existing infrastructure, making it a key player in the countries' internal affairs.

This economic role lay at the heart of the U.S. intervention in Guatemala in 1954, which resulted in the establishment of a brutal military dictatorship. The United States also supported a similarly brutal regime in El Salvador. The extreme inequality that characterized both country's economies, and the lack of any possibility for political dissent, led to the development of strong guerrilla movements in both places. The result was civil war and extreme violence, leading to massive social dislocation and the beginning of large-scale Guatemalan and Salvadoran migration to the United States.

These migrants were met with an unfriendly U.S. administration led by Ronald Reagan. Known for his fierce anti-communism, Reagan argued: "The national security of all Americans is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves here, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere." As a result, the administration dramatically increased its military and economic assistance to the region. In total, the United States provided \$6 billion in economic and military aid to El Salvador during its 12-year civil war. Given the country's estimated population of about 2.5 million people in 1980, this sum is equivalent to \$2,400 for every Salvadoran individual. U.S. economic and military aid to Guatemala was not at



Photo from Getty Images.

Central Americans line up to seek asylum in the U.S. in 1989.

the same level, with direct military aid during the 1980s totaling only \$30 million. However, in both cases, the Reagan administration had strong political reasons not to acknowledge the extreme human rights violations perpetrated by its allies. As one U.S. diplomat who served during the Reagan administration put it: "Unless they [administration officials] see a guy like D'Aubuisson running a machete through somebody, they're inclined to ignore it... There is absolutely zero conception of what these people are really like, how evil they really are."

As a result, fewer than 5 percent of the Central American petitions for political asylum were approved, and, unlike the Cuban case, the government provided no assistance to facilitate Central American immigrants' settlement in the United States. In 1981, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) formally criticized U.S. policy, arguing that the United States was not living up to its international responsibilities. Reagan did not change his policies. Subsequent administrations did regularize the status of some Central American

migrants, but many remain in legal "limbo" in the United States.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, there were important domestic and international political reasons why the U.S. government involved itself in the politics of Latin American countries and encouraged or discouraged migration from them. These economic and political interests have had a significant impact on which countries Latin American migrants originate from, when they come and how they are treated upon arrival. For different reasons, the U.S. government has made immigrant settlement much easier for some national-origin groups than for others. This brief overview should make clear the importance of U.S. foreign and economic policy in explaining the current face of Latin American migration to the United States.

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