

James C. Knarr. *Uruguay and the United States, 1903-1929: Diplomacy in the Progressive Era*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2012. 224 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60635-128-4.

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Uruguay: Where the Roosevelt Corollary Doesn't Apply

When thinking about U.S. policy in Latin America between 1903 and 1929, many historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era are likely to think of military interventions conducted under the auspices of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine and economic penetration via “dollar diplomacy.” In his study of U.S.-Uruguayan relations during this period, James Knarr tells a different story, stressing the amicable exchanges between the two countries. The most important thing for scholars of U.S. foreign policy and the Gilded Age and Progressive Era to take away from Knarr’s work is that U.S. relations with South American countries were very different from those with Central American and Caribbean countries. For Uruguay in particular, Knarr argues that “the United States did not need to coerce Uruguay economically, politically, or militarily to achieve its goals; Uruguay was a friendly and stable nation that the United States could use as an economic and political gateway into the Southern Cone” (p. 5).

Knarr characterizes Uruguayan policy toward the United States as proactive, while U.S. policy toward Uruguay was reactive (p. 149). That proactive Uruguayan policy stemmed from both geopolitical and domestic circumstances. The British had negotiated for the creation of Uruguay as a buffer state in the River Plate region in 1828, and as a result, Uruguay was repeatedly enmeshed in conflicts with Brazil and Argentina, as well as being in a neocolonial economic relationship with Britain. Beginning in the 1890s, Uruguayan officials began to seek a closer relationship with the United States, frequently

requesting and receiving the presence of U.S. naval vessels at times when Uruguayan independence was in jeopardy. Uruguayan officials also encouraged greater economic exchange with the United States to counter British dominance. In domestic politics, José Batlle y Ordoñez and his supporters held power. They advocated the liberal reform of Uruguay via an expanded franchise, structural changes in government, innovations in agriculture and technology, improved labor conditions, and similar progressive, modern policies. In this respect, the United States served as a model for Uruguayan politicians, who drew on U.S. examples to justify their policy recommendations; they also sent Uruguayans to the United States to study and observe, and they hired U.S. experts to develop educational institutions and other programs in Uruguay.

The United States and Uruguay exchanged consuls shortly after Uruguayan independence and later posted diplomats, but interactions between the two countries were minimal in the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the challenges of travel between the two countries; ocean travel between Uruguay and Europe was much easier and considerably cheaper. The rise of Batlle’s party and direct steamship connections between the United States and Uruguay roughly coincided, facilitating exchange from the 1890s. The key event that put Uruguay on the mental map of more people in the United States was the visit of secretary of state Elihu Root in 1906. Part of a larger South American tour designed to improve relations marred by the Roosevelt Corollary, Root’s four days in Montevideo were a major symbolic success.

The secretary was greeted enthusiastically by large, pro-American crowds, and he took back to the United States the image of Uruguay as a stable, friendly, and civilized country. More American travelers followed Root, as did businessmen. In the years before World War I, U.S. companies gained several important footholds, winning contracts for railroad construction, banking, and oil extraction. Ford opened three factories in Uruguay, and all four major U.S. meat companies, including Swift and Armor, operated packinghouses there. With the economic disruptions of World War I, U.S. companies were able to achieve prominence in the Uruguayan economy, displacing the British.

The Uruguayan government was a strong supporter of Woodrow Wilson's policies during the war. Uruguay was officially neutral at the beginning, with its leaders thinking not only of economic and political ties to Britain and the United States, but also of economic ties to Germany and, more importantly, of the approximately 400,000 German Brazilians living along the northern border. Just as Wilson strained the definition of neutrality and favored the Allies, Uruguayan president Feliciano Viera altered the rules to allow U.S. ships into Uruguayan ports. In October 1917, the Uruguayan government broke diplomatic relations with Germany following the loss of the *Rosario* to German U-boats and the news—via British-decoded German communiqués—that some in the German government did seek to mobilize the Germans in Brazil. The Uruguayan government seized eight German merchant ships that had been in Montevideo harbor since the start of the war, eventually leasing the ships to the U.S. Emergency Fleet Corporation—and, in so doing, embarking on a legal dispute that would not be resolved until 1926. In acknowledgment of support for the United States during the war and the existence of outstanding legal disputes, secretary of state Robert Lansing agreed to advocate for seats at the Paris Peace Conference for countries that had broken relations with Germany but had not declared war, including Uruguay. Lansing was successful, and the Uruguayan delegation actively supported Wilson's League of Nations plans at the conference.

Relations between the United States and Uruguay deteriorated in the 1920s as progressive politicians lost ground in both countries. As more people gained a voice in Uruguayan politics and U.S. economic penetration of the country intensified, anti-American sentiment became more prominent, and some key liberals who had traditionally embraced the United States turned away. Following the Bolshevik Revolution and the advent of a very

pro-business Republican Party, U.S. officials were more apt to see liberal Uruguayan policies as communist. In an effort to improve relations, Uruguayan footballers toured the United States in 1927, and president-elect Herbert Hoover stopped in Montevideo as part of a South American tour in late 1928, but the success of these efforts was limited. Knarr ends his account in October 1929, when, in the same week, Batlle, the anchor of Uruguayan liberalism, died and the stock market crashed, ushering in a global economic depression. By 1931, Uruguay was a dictatorship drawing heavily on European fascist models to try and stem the tide of economic devastation.

Knarr's study is short, with the body coming in at only 150 pages. To some degree, that brevity fits, since he chose to focus on twenty-six years of elite politics between two governments whose relations were not often controversial. There are some missed opportunities here, though. In linking a relatively understudied country like Uruguay to larger historiographies of U.S. foreign policy and turn-of-the-century reform, an author has the chance to teach the readers of the larger historiography something about the more obscure country. Knarr's book provides very little information about the broader Uruguayan context in which official relations with the United States took place. Not being an expert on Uruguay, I wondered about the basic structure of the Uruguayan government, which apparently allowed Batlle to exercise tremendous influence for decades, even when he was not in office. I also wanted to know more about what else was going on in Uruguayan foreign policy—especially relations with Britain—that would have helped gauge the relative importance of the United States for Uruguay. Most importantly, I wanted to know more about the extent of public support for Batlle and his programs. In the U.S. context, historiography over the past twenty years attuned to race and class, among other analytical lenses, has called into question how “good” the Progressives were. Although reformers did many positive things, their initiatives distributed benefits unevenly and came a great cost to many people. Knarr tells us that Batlle did not look favorably on the way race operated in the United States, but the reader does not learn how race worked in Uruguay, or what the human costs of liberal reforms were. Perhaps there is not much historiography on this aspect of Uruguayan history, but Knarr doesn't tell us about the state of the field. There is some effort to connect Uruguayan reforms to similar efforts in Mexico and Japan (pp. 62-63), but not to the extensive historiography on progressive reform in Europe and North America. It

is clear from Knarr's work that Uruguay is another place we should be looking to understand the global process of reform at the turn of the century, but it is up to the reader to make those connections.

In framing the work narrowly as an exploration of an understudied bilateral relationship, Knarr keeps the historiographical stakes low. He does show us that we

should avoid the trap that many U.S. officials at the time fell into, namely, thinking about Latin America as an undifferentiated region. Splitting Central America and the Caribbean from South America is an important first step, since U.S. military interventions did not extend so far south. The rules of interaction there were different, and the opportunities for more positive relations were greater, as the Uruguayan case shows.

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