

Richard M. Nixon at the National Press Club, May 21, 1958



Vice President Richard M. Nixon (center) with Sen. John F. Kennedy (right), Jacob Seidenberg (at podium), Herman Edelsberg and Ruth Rabb, May 1958. National Press Club Archives

Vice President Richard M. Nixon (1913-1994) spoke to reporters at a National Press Club luncheon and fielded their questions one week after his “goodwill” trip to eight South American nations ended in a vicious demonstration of anti-Americanism that threatened his life. Nixon kept his cool throughout the ordeal and returned home to accept a hero’s welcome. The encounter, one of the “Six Crises” Nixon described in the book he wrote a few years later bearing that title, led the vice president to urge President Dwight D. Eisenhower to revamp U.S. policy toward Latin America. At the nationally televised Press Club talk, he expressed opinions in this vein that he fleshed out for the president in a National Security Council meeting the following day.

Relations between the U.S. and Latin America have been guided by the Monroe Doctrine, formulated in an 1823 message to Congress by President James Monroe in response to threatened Russian and French incursions into the Western Hemisphere. In effect, the doctrine established a U.S. sphere of influence by warning European powers against future colonization in the Americas. President Theodore Roosevelt added a corollary in 1904 to justify the U.S. becoming the region’s “international police power” when chaotic internal conditions resulting from “chronic wrongdoing” or “incompetence” otherwise might invite European interference. During the first third of the twentieth century, the U.S. engaged in military interventions in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Panama, Mexico, Haiti, and Nicaragua, and greatly expanded its economic interests in the region. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt disavowed the policy of U.S. military intervention in

Latin America and instituted a “Good Neighbor Policy” that facilitated hemispheric cooperation during World War II.

After the Cold War began, the U.S. prioritized the containment of communism in Europe and Asia and the economic recovery of Western Europe and Japan despite calls from Latin American nations for their own Marshall Plan. To thwart communist advances in the region, the U.S. adopted a policy of arming anticommunist strongmen who employed harsh repressive measures. In 1954, the U.S. covertly intervened to overthrow a left-leaning popularly elected government in Guatemala. Eisenhower’s secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, asserted, “This intrusion of Soviet despotism was, of course, a direct challenge to our Monroe Doctrine, the first and most fundamental of our foreign policies.” Following the overthrow, Dulles and Eisenhower believed that the Soviet Union had shifted its short-term strategy in Latin America to infiltrating nationalist movements and fomenting anti-Americanism in order to turn elected governments toward a neutral stance in the Cold War conflict. Nixon in his 1958 trip would make efforts to talk with those in the intelligentsia he feared might succumb to communist propaganda.

In 1955, Nixon had visited Central America, where he antagonized many by comparing Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista to Abraham Lincoln and embracing the Dominican Republic tyrant, Rafael Trujillo. More than most of his predecessors, Vice President Nixon achieved high visibility during his terms in office. The responsibilities of the vice president, designated in the Constitution only as the presiding officer of the Senate, had increased during the New Deal with the expansion of the federal government and growth in the power of the president in both internal and world affairs. The vice president in time became a member of the cabinet and the National Security Council, and often acted as the president’s adviser and spokesperson. Nixon’s presence on the world stage intensified when Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in September 1955 and a stroke in November 1957, and also during his well-publicized foreign trips where he functioned as the president’s proxy.

Prior to the 1958 trip, administration officials warned of a planned Soviet economic offensive in the region. Although the president’s brother and adviser, Dr. Milton Eisenhower, encouraged a policy shift to allow for more developmental aid, the administration’s economic hardliners turned a deaf ear. Nixon initially refused to go to South America again when he was asked to represent the U.S. at the inauguration of the new president of Argentina, Arturo Frondisi, but after he agreed, he came to appreciate it as an opportunity to meet with those in universities, labor organizations, and the media, whom he recognized as opinion makers and future leaders. In Lima, Peru, where communists had fanned resentment of Eisenhower’s support of dictators and concern over the effects of U.S. economic policies, a crowd of some 2,000 protesters blocked Nixon’s entrance to San Marcos University. They shouted him down when he attempted to speak and threw rocks, bottles, eggs, and oranges. A stone nicked Nixon’s neck. From his car, Nixon yelled, “You are cowards, you are afraid of the truth!” An hour later, in a mob scene at the entrance to his hotel, a man spat on his cheek. Nixon later wrote, “I went through in that instant a terrible test of temper control. One must experience the sensation to realize why spitting in a

person's face is the most infuriating insult ever conceived by man." Nixon kicked the man in the shins.

Five days later, as they stood at attention at an airport outside Caracas while a band played the Venezuelan national anthem, Nixon and his wife Pat stoically withstood a barrage of tobacco-drenched spit from hundreds of zealous jeerers occupying an overhanging observation deck. He later wrote, "We preferred the indignity of spit to that of letting the mob see the Vice President of the United States duck and run away." Four months earlier, Venezuela had ousted the brutal dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, to whom Eisenhower had awarded the Legion of Merit. That the U.S. also gave asylum to Pérez Jiménez and his hated secret police chief infuriated many Venezuelans.

As Nixon's motorcade stopped in heavy traffic near the center of the city, demonstrators surrounded his car and police protection fled. Rioters pelted the car windows with clubs, rocks, pipes, and fists. When the shatterproof glass failed to give way, the mob tried to overturn the car. Nixon realized he might be killed. "I knew now what was happening," he wrote. "It was a common tactic for mobs throughout the world to rock a car, turn it over, set it afire." After a few Venezuelan soldiers helped the cars escape the rioters, Nixon wisely ordered the driver to head straight for the Embassy, a decision that may have saved his life, as he explained in the Press Club talk.

To Nixon's dismay, Eisenhower ordered airborne infantry, marines, and an aircraft carrier to locations within striking distance of Venezuela to rescue him if necessary. After news spread throughout Latin America about the possible invasion, Nixon tried to calm outraged Latin Americans by issuing a statement that the Venezuelan government had the situation under control and outside assistance would not be needed.

In *Six Crises*, Nixon described the riots as a "much-needed shock treatment which jolted us out of dangerous complacency." He told a Cabinet meeting that he believed the complaint that the U.S. harbored refugee dictators was more important than economic concerns, though he also insisted, "we must be dedicated to raising the standard of living of the masses." He emphasized to the National Security Council that the communist threat in Latin America was greater than at any time in past history, but also called attention to the responsibility of the U.S. to make up a \$1 billion annual trade deficit with the region and to face its other problems. In closing, he indicated his own position with regard to the debate within the administration regarding developmental aid by stating that a cancellation—of which he had heard rumors—of Milton Eisenhower's upcoming trip to Latin America, would be "a serious mistake."

The Eisenhower administration gradually changed its policies toward Latin America during the next two years. It supported negotiations of international price support agreements for important Latin American commodities and the creation of a regional development bank and common market. Following Cuba's move into the

Soviet sphere, Eisenhower dramatically increased economic assistance to the rest of Latin America, while taking steps to try to overthrow the Castro regime.

The South American trip caused a bounce in Nixon's poll ratings. In the Gallup poll prior to the trip, he trailed his potential 1960 presidential opponent, Senator John F. Kennedy, by 50 to 36 percent. Just after the trip, Nixon's numbers rose to 40 percent, while Kennedy's dropped to 44. The effect wore off after the 1958 midterm elections proved disastrous for the Republicans.

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief*,
National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress

Bibliography

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Nixon, Richard M. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978.

_____. *Six Crises*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1962.

Rabe, Stephen. *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Smith, Gaddis. *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

US Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*. Vol. V, *American Republics*. Vice President Richard M. Nixon's Trip to South America, April 27-May 15, 1958. Washington: GPO, 1991.

Zahniser, Marvin R., and W. Michael Weis. "A Diplomatic Pearl Harbor? Richard Nixon's Goodwill Mission to Latin America in 1958." *Diplomatic History* 13 (Spring 1989): 163-90.