

**Writing the Gringo Patrón:  
Popular Responses to Nelson Rockefeller's  
1969 Presidential Mission to Latin America**

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Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

*Summary*

In the spring and summer of 1969, Nelson Rockefeller embarked on four ill-fated journeys to twenty Latin American countries on a “fact-finding tour” for US President Richard Nixon. The voyages sought to forge a new multilateral American foreign policy and initiate a period of hemispheric collaboration; instead, they brought massive demonstrations, military repression, and a trail of blood, leading contemporaries and historians to view the trip as a public relations disaster. The research I conducted at the Rockefeller Archive Center over the course of five weeks in June and July 2008 with the support of a Grant-in-Aid suggests that this view does not accurately reflect the complexity of the encounters that the trip engendered. Indeed, the visits crystallized a series of transnational imaginaries that crossed class and political lines across the hemisphere.

## *The Presidential Mission*

Soon after his 1969 inauguration, President Richard Nixon contacted Galo Plaza, Secretary of the Organization of American States, to ask his advice concerning the best means to bolster U.S. ties with Latin America. Plaza suggested that Nixon enlist New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller to visit the region, as “his name is still magic.” Rockefeller was surprised to receive the invitation from his former rival for the Republican nomination, but quickly agreed to undertake the journey. In his typically largesse manner, however, the Governor quickly expanded the goodwill tour into a “Presidential Mission” that would take him to twenty countries south of the Rio Grande in an effort to create a hemispheric gesture of solidarity. However, as his former speechwriter, Joseph Persico put it, “[Rockefeller’s] name was still magic to the oligarchies, the latifundistas, the conservative, U.S.-educated, old-family ruling classes in Latin America. But to the Latin left, his name was anathema.”<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the death of a demonstrator in Honduras, the trip soon devolved into what Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett have termed the “Rocky Horror Road Show:” a polarizing moment characterized by mass protests and the fanning of virulent anti-American fires.<sup>2</sup> When the Governor returned, the Administration and Congress met the recommendation for a multilateral approach to hemispheric unity with polite acceptance before shelving them as the State Department pursued a systematic policy of intensifying a militaristic solution to the challenge posed by the red flames burning to the south.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph E. Persico, *The Imperial Rockefeller: A Political Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Colby with Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will be Done, the Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995).

## *The Scholarship and its Gaps*

The existing historiography on the subject is slight, partially as a result of a general perception that the journey represented an unmitigated policy and public relations failure. This view was articulated as early as 1970 by James Petras and has formed the basic framework for subsequent treatments of the journey, including a brief treatment in Colby and Dennett's study of Nelson Rockefeller's ties to the petroleum industry in Latin America and more extensively in Peter Bales' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation "Nelson Rockefeller and His Quest for Inter-American Unity."<sup>3</sup> A number of contemporary essays and later surveys of US-Latin American relations have also treated the mission's report as a flawed and anachronistic Cold War document that called for greater Inter-American governmental cooperation but failed to call for extensive social reforms. Both of these interpretations are in serious need of revision.

The existing scholarship has been based largely on American periodicals and the report Rockefeller submitted to Nixon because research predated the availability of several important document series at the Rockefeller Archive Center. These include planning materials such as briefing books, correspondence with Latin American leaders, the minutes of Rockefeller's meetings with members of the Rand Corporation, the Council on Foreign Affairs and other think tanks, as well as myriad drafts of the official report. Over the past two years, the papers of several members of the Governor's support staff, including Special Assistant James M. Cannon, the speechwriter Joseph A. Persico, and secretaries Diane Van Wie and Ann Whitman, have also been released.<sup>4</sup> This broad documentary evidence demonstrates a much more nuanced understanding of the region than that which would become enshrined in the *Rockefeller Report*

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<sup>3</sup> See James Petras, *Politics and Social Structure in Latin America* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1970), especially Chapter 3, and Peter Bales, *Nelson Rockefeller and His Quest for Inter-American Unity* (Ph.D. Dissertation: SUNY Stony Brook, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See below for an annotated breakdown of the relevant series.

*on the Americas*.<sup>5</sup> The drafts of the report, for example, include copious discussions of structural adjustments necessary to address social troubles of the region, the perspective of labor and student activists, and some virulent castigations of American policy. As such, they document the degree to which the final report represented a consciously fabricated vision of the hemisphere that purposely elided its unsavory attributes, an image of a simplified Latin America palatable to both the Nixon Administration and the American public.

A second series of documents hitherto ignored by historians also challenge the reductive constitution of the mission as an unmitigated failure in fomenting inter-American solidarity. These consist of thousands of appeals within the “Countries” series of Nelson Rockefeller’s personal files that were penned in the mission’s wake by a wide variety of correspondents, including urban professionals, petty merchants, parents, retirees, schoolchildren, the infirm, and other needy individuals. Although summarily dismissed with ubiquitous form letters by members of his staff, the solicitations demonstrate the impact that Rockefeller’s mission and his philanthropic reputation had at the popular level in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Individuals requested aid for a dizzying variety of needs, of which the most common are educational support, medical payments, new employment, or immigration assistance. Several institutions also sought help from the Governor for development projects, the construction of new schools, and orphanages. Taxi drivers requested second-hand cars, con-artists hoped for bundles of cash, while numerous parents asked that Rockefeller adopt their children or stand as godfather. Most correspondents articulated their request within the framework of the mission, whose object “to listen” to Latin Americans had been repeatedly invoked by Rockefeller and his associates in the local press. As

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<sup>5</sup> See Nelson A. Rockefeller, *The Rockefeller report on the Americas: The official report of a United States Presidential mission for the Western Hemisphere* (Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> A similar array of appeals to John D. Rockefeller from Americans down on their luck has been analyzed by Scott A. Sandage, in *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). See especially Chapter 8, “Big Business and Little Men.”

such, these requests are couched as mini exposés of poverty and hardship designed to arouse sympathy and a positive reply. Many distanced themselves from the “extremist” elements that had confronted Nixon’s emissary in the summer of 1969, in the process underscoring their support for the democratic ideals of the United States; indeed, some wrote with no other object than to establish their disdain of the radicals and students whom they blamed for destabilizing their country and insulting the “great American.”

*Countries Files Report (RG III, 4, E)*

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center in the summer of 2008 comprised my third visit to the archive. On my first trip in 2005, whilst researching Nelson Rockefeller’s encounters with Ecuadorian émigré artists Camilo Egas and Oswaldo Guayasamin, I discovered that the vast majority of unsolicited solicitations in the Ecuador files from the Countries series had arrived in the wake of the 1969 Presidential Mission.<sup>7</sup> I was struck by the degree to which correspondents writing under the military government that took power soon after Rockefeller’s visit emphasized their allegiance to the Governor’s mission and the goals of the Alliance for Progress and their disdain for the “chusma” that had been so vociferous in its opposition. Upon a return to the archive in 2007 in hopes of researching an article concerning the emigration desires of Ecuadorian nationals, I sampled some of the Colombian files and discovered similar concerns voiced in the unsolicited correspondence, which not only included desires for emigration but also a series of suggestions from socialist activists and radical conservatives on how to solve the ongoing Colombian conflict. At that point, I knew that the phenomenon I had observed in the

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<sup>7</sup> This percentage is relatively consistent throughout the files with more letters appearing in the records from countries visited than those that were scratched. Unfortunately, the majority of appeals before 1959 were destroyed in the aftermath of the journey by a staff overwhelmed by these materials which makes it impossible to compare to earlier periods such as Nelson Rockefeller’s tenure as Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs.

Ecuadorian papers represented a transnational phenomenon that inspired me to expand my research focus.

When I returned to Sleepy Hollow in June 2008, I built a database in which I logged selected missives to the Governor (and a few to his wife, Happy!), from several other national records within the Countries series. These involved twenty-five boxes of material with thousands of letters, internal staff memos, replies and return correspondence from the following nations: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. I have yet to review the files from Rockefeller's Central American trip, including what appear to be substantial holdings from Mexico, as well as smaller collections such as those from Paraguay and Uruguay. Strikingly, the number of solicitations from countries that were not part of the tour, including both Peru and Venezuela, which cancelled the Governor's visit, are substantially fewer than those in which he set foot, despite the long-standing ties between Rockefeller and these states, particularly Venezuela. As such, we can conclude that the journey touched the "hearts and minds" of these areas more than previously considered.

*1969 Presidential Mission General (RG III, 4 O, Subseries 8)*

This is by far the most extensive series concerning the Latin American mission and, after the Countries series, perhaps the most illuminating. The material exposes the process of creating background summaries and briefing books on each country visited, personal meetings with various think-tanks prior to Governor Rockefeller's trips, reams of correspondence to organize each visit, as well as multiple drafts of the final report. Of particular interest are the minutes of a series of meetings between advisors at Pocantico Hills that suggest that the Governor's inner circle hoped to include a vast array of information critical of the unilateral diplomatic approach

of American foreign policy. Andrew McLellan's reports on Latin American labor are especially instructive regarding the degree to which the mission was aware of the antipathy to American free trade policies that was systematically excised from final drafts of the report. There are also a number of instances in which advisors to the Governor mention the arrival of a series of unsolicited letters from Latin American nationals soliciting support with health care and employment that suggest that the appeals sent to Nelson Rockefeller also filtered to other members of his entourage. I was not able to complete my review of these files and have great hopes that more information on the degree to which Rockefeller's entourage encouraged a nuanced approach to US foreign policy in the region may be found therein.

*Gubernatorial Files Report (RG III, 15)*

The Gubernatorial files include several subseries of interest to this project that involve correspondence and other materials generated by the offices of several personal assistants of Governor Rockefeller. The most important are Series 7 (James Cannon Files), Series 34 (Diane Van Wie Files,) and Series 35 (Ann C. Whitman Files). While these files include materials from a vast swatch of Rockefeller's tenure as Governor of New York, the materials on the Presidential Mission are abundant. They largely include logistical correspondence that may allow for a systematic analysis of the intellectual and business connections of both Rockefeller's mission and his contacts in various Latin American countries. The James Cannon files also include a series of drafts of the final report, including several that bolster the contentions made above regarding the dissention within the ranks of advisors and the possibility of desires for a more nuanced policy than that adopted by the Report and by the Nixon administration.

### *Preliminary Conclusions*

The sources that I have discovered at the Rockefeller Archive Center call into question the prevailing analysis of the 1969 mission. While more research is necessary, they reveal the existence of hemispheric imaginaries from across political lines that came into stark relief during and after the trip. From both the perspective of the organizers and the Governor's correspondents, the trip concretized abstractions such as Latin America, the United States, Nelson Rockefeller, poverty, or Pan Americanism. Even so, the encounters crystallized by the four journeys can be shown to have been mutable, contingent, and flexible. Passionate advocates of pan-Americanism are abundant as are those who would employ these rhetorical tools either for personal or national gain. Moreover, these sentiments can be shown to have been engaged both by calculating elites and diplomats, on the one hand, or hopeful appellants and cagey swindlers, on the other. Regardless, the response to Nelson Rockefeller's 1969 Presidential Mission can demonstrate the complex iterations of local, national, and transnational identity that circulated throughout Latin American society during the Cold War, in contradistinction to the Manichean protestations of right and left.