Nelson Rockefeller’s Report and Richard Nixon’s Foreign Policy towards Latin America

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**Abstract**

This research paper is composed of four parts. The first one presents Nelson Rockefeller’s mission to Latin America in 1969 and details his official report to President Richard Nixon. In the second part, I highlight the main aspects of the new foreign policy designed by the Nixon administration toward Latin America. The third part points out several primary sources related to the mission that could help academics improve their current understanding of the Latin American Cold War. Lastly, the final section of this paper evaluates the results of this new policy.
An Attempt to Improve US-Latin American Relations

At the beginning of his term, in January 1969, Richard Nixon decided to try to redefine US relations with Latin American countries. During the previous eight years under Democratic leadership in the White House with John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, the United States had initiated the Alliance for Progress. This program was supposed to represent a shift in American relations with the region. The White House’s strategy was to send US$20 billion to the region in ten years, but this amount was not to go to the military, as had been done in the past. Its main goal was to reduce poverty to help redirect Latin America away from communism. However, as Nixon arrived at the White House, Latin Americans were disappointed with those American promises (Rockefeller, 1969e; SNI, 1969), and the new administration looked for a different approach.

Nixon’s first effort to implement a new agenda was to send Nelson Rockefeller on four work trips to nineteen Latin American countries from May to July 1969. The idea behind that initiative, suggested by the OAS Secretary-General Galo Plaza, was to listen to the Latin American representatives to better understand their needs and priorities before establishing a new policy towards the region.

After returning from the trips, Nelson Rockefeller, who was New York’s governor at that time, produced with his team the “Quality of Life in the Americas: Report of a U.S. Presidential Mission for the Western Hemisphere” (Rockefeller, 1969e). It was the result of deep work conducted by dozens of advisors, as Rockefeller was accompanied by more than twenty people on each trip. Each of these individuals was responsible for a specific topic, with the goal of producing two reports about it: one before the trip and the other one after, based on their conversations with local officials and on statistical data.
Nelson Rockefeller and his team of advisors for the presidential mission in Latin America (Available at the Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller Photographs, Room 5600, Rockefeller Family Office, Series 2 - Presidential Mission to Latin America, 1969 - Box 32).

Rockefeller’s report was delivered to the White House at the end of August 1969, and it was composed of five chapters and a letter to the president. The first part enumerated a list of thirteen topics that should be addressed in an “era of changes” to revitalize the relationship with Latin American countries. It included a wide range of topics about those societies, such as trade policies, the military, nationalism, education, labor markets, religion, agriculture, health, women’s position in each country, etc. The content of each topic was inspired by the advisors’ reports mentioned above.

Given the magnitude of such trips, the current literature about the report is still germinal. In a book published in 2020, Rabe argued that the Rockefeller report reinforced the White House’s perception that the military was the best
alternative for the United States in the region (Rabe, 2020). Earlier, Capello published a research paper about his time at the Rockefeller Archive Center. He claimed that the meager historiography about the subject emphasized the public relations failures during the mission, as exemplified by massive demonstrations in some countries. However, Capello suggested the need for a revision of this argument, pointing out the accomplishments of the trips, as well (Capello, 2009).

There are also a few theses and dissertations that mentioned the relevance of the Rockefeller mission in the formulation of Nixon’s foreign policy towards the region (Martin, 2019; Caterina, 2012; Sion, 2023). In the next part of this research report, I will point out the main goals of Nixon’s foreign policy in Latin America.

**Nixon’s Policy toward Latin America**

Rockefeller’s report was not the only effort made by Nixon’s White House to establish a new policy toward Latin America. During the first half of 1969, Henry Kissinger and the National Security Council produced the NSSM 15 (National Security Study Memorandum). Both studies analyzed the same points, and they had only a few disagreements. An internal criticism about the Rockefeller report was that his suggestions did not measure its impacts on American relations with other regions. This point was mentioned specifically regarding commercial benefits required for Latin American products (United States, 1969a).

A second disagreement was about the level of the threat represented by Cuban actions in Latin America. According to NSSM 15, nationalism was the biggest risk for Washington in the region, while communism was only a potential threat in the long term (United States, 1969a). Another report produced by the CIA argued that the Cuban influence through guerrilla activity was being reduced, due to a change in Latin America: at the beginning of Nixon’s government, the
armed struggle was moving from rural areas to the cities, where they decided to have more tactical and financial independence from Havana (CIA, 1971). Rockefeller’s report, however, stated that communism was still a real threat in 1969. Kissinger minimized this point suggesting that it was only a theoretical divergence.

After several meetings between different agencies inside the Nixon administration, the new policy regarding Latin America was based on five points: 1) to adopt a more automatic government recognition mechanism, strengthening the inter-American system; 2) to increase the supply of military equipment for Latin American countries, trying to eliminate the legislation that hindered this initiative; 3) to give commercial advantages to countries in the region; 4) to encourage investments by businessmen from the region and also by private US companies. In addition, the White House should reduce involvement in protecting US private investments in these countries (eliminating the Hickenlooper Amendment was one of the goals); 5) to strengthen assistance and multilateral organizations, sharing responsibilities with local countries (Vaky, 1969).

Those guidelines were suggested by the Rockefeller report. Nixon made a statement about it in November 1969, pointing out that Rockefeller’s work was a “major contribution to the formulation of our policy for this hemisphere” (Nixon, 1969). During an internal meeting, the president stated that symbolism was crucial in the relationship with Latin America to generate a psychological impact. Nixon also argued that “the Latin Americans don’t have competence. […] The Latins know they are not special” (United States, 1969b).

It is worth mentioning that this assumption about Latin Americans was not shared by Nelson Rockefeller. During the entire mission, Rockefeller tried to please his Latin American hosts. His prior connections with the region were crucial to be appointed as the mission leader and Rockefeller did not want to harm those relationships or business. During the process, Rockefeller always signalized his intention to declassify his report as soon as possible. Kissinger,
on the other hand, argued against this possibility. The decision about this topic was a mid-term solution in which the final report became available for the public but not the country reports, the more detailed material about each visit (Sion, 2023).

**Beyond the Mission Report**

The Rockefeller report is not a self-contained primary source relevant for researchers related to the mission. During the entire process, from the trip preparations to the report’s repercussions, the actors involved produced an extensive quantity of documents. In this section of my research report, I will focus on three main categories of primary sources: preparation material, comments about the work meetings in Latin America, and drafts of the final report. As such, it is worth mentioning that the Rockefeller Archive Center offers other types of documents about the mission that represent avenues for future research.

The planning materials are diverse and include briefing books and detailed background information about each country to be visited, internal discussions about the work to be done, and bureaucratic information about the flights and the hotels.

In addition to the internal discussions, the material also provides information exchanged with other stakeholders. Galo Plaza was a relevant interlocutor of Nelson Rockefeller during the entire process related to the report’s preparation. Even before the announcement of the mission, Plaza sent to Rockefeller a list of suggestions for the report, including the “extensive use of multilateral” organizations. Another relevant point was to highlight US confidence in Latin America’s ability to define its own priorities (Plaza, 1969). This subject appeared in several meetings between Rockefeller and Latin American representatives. The concept of giving more autonomy to the region was positive for both sides: Washington was trying to reduce its participation in
Latin America and the governments from the continent wanted to have more freedom to invest the aid received from the White House. As I stated in the last section, it became one of the US foreign policy goals for the region, even though President Nixon did not trust in Latin American competence to do this job. In this sense, this movement in American diplomacy reinforces the relevance of a recent agenda in the international relations field, i.e., the necessity to study local agency (Harmer, 2012; Joseph and Spenser, 2008).

A second category of documents contains the raw material about each visit. It includes reports from all the advisors, who were focused on specific subjects mentioned in the last section. The most interesting primary sources of this group are Nelson Rockefeller’s perceptions about his meetings with Latin American leaders. In Brazil, for example, Rockefeller had two meetings with President Arthur da Costa e Silva, who led the Brazilian military regime from March 1967 to August 1969. Costa e Silva pointed out the Brazilian efforts to fight communism in South America, detailing his initiatives regarding Uruguay and Paraguay and asking for military assistance from Washington. In turn, Nelson Rockefeller mentioned four constraints that were challenging the White House to improve its relationship with Brazil: “Congress had been recessed, individual rights suspended, the press harassed and hailed, and rough tactics were used by the police and military without regard for individual liberties” (Rockefeller, 1969b).

The Rockefeller papers also analyzed the transition in the Brazilian military regime after the removal of Costa e Silva due to a stroke. His successor, General Emílio Garrastazu Médici, was characterized as moderate in comparison to his main competitor, Albuquerque Lima (Rockefeller, 1969b). Médici was elected in an internal election by the armed forces, and nowadays he is considered the harshest president of the Brazilian military regime (Chirio, 2012).

The third group of primary sources is related to the final report’s drafts. It shows some disagreements among the mission’s members. One of the most relevant discussions was related to Washington’s relationship with the Latin American
military. A group of advisors argued that the United States should deepen its support to military dictatorships in the region, as they were reliable allies regarding American national security interests (Borella, 1969). On the other hand, a part of Rockefeller’s team suggested making “a severe curtailment of the military assistance program making a clear distinction between a military which supports constitutional government e.g., Uruguay and one which has usurped it such as Brazil” (Levinson, 1969). The disagreement related to Brazil arose before the Nixon administration. After a fast recognition of the new military regime in 1964, Johnson’s White House became disappointed with Castello Branco’s government and even more during the Costa e Silva’s period, when the Brazilians implemented the AI-5 (Institutional Act Number 5) in December 1968, suspending habeas corpus and increasing repression. During the transition from Johnson to Nixon and in the preparation for Rockefeller’s mission, different American representatives discussed how to deal with the Brazilians’ path towards authoritarianism (Belton, 1969).

Although the final report was delivered in August 1969, and later published by the White House in November 1969, part of Rockefeller’s team maintained its contact with Latin American representatives (Friele, 1970). In April 1970, one of the top Rockefeller advisors, Berent Friele, met with Médici’s son. In their conversation, they discussed Brazilian worries about the current governments in Chile, Peru, and Bolivia. After the meeting, Friele wrote to Kissinger arguing that the White House should give more attention to Brazil (Friele, 1970b).

**An Evaluation of Nixon’s Policy towards Latin America**

Nixon’s initial plans for Latin America had to be changed in 1971, due to the election of Salvador Allende as Chile’s president. This fact increased the perception that there was a real threat of leftists who could govern a series of Latin American countries. Consequently, the White House decided to review its policies regarding the region.
Following some advice from CIA officer Vernon Walters, the White House decided to improve even more its relations with the Latin American military, especially with Brazil and Argentina (Walters, 1970). A signal of this decision was the invitation to Brazilian President Médici to visit Washington in December 1971. Following the strategy to produce symbolic movements towards Latin America, Nixon asked Médici’s opinion about relevant topics, such as the Rockefeller report and plans to visit China and Soviet Union in the following months. In turn, Médici detailed Brazil’s actions to help Uruguay and Bolivia to prevent the implementation of communism in South American countries (Kissinger, 1971).

There were also a number of ambiguous analyses of the results of Nixon’s foreign policy to Latin America. In 1973, a NSC study admitted that the initial plans to Latin America were not implemented: there was no concession in trade preferences, consultations on White House decision-making were less frequent than anticipated, and there had been a worsening relationship with the military (Crimmins, 1973).

On the other hand, a document produced by the State Department in 1974 argued that two goals of the Nixon foreign policy for the region were reached: the level of threat for external security in the hemisphere had diminished and American investment and assistance became less important (State Department, 1974).

Even after the end of Nixon’s presidency, the Rockefeller report was still debated. On the last day of 1975, when Rockefeller was serving as vice president of Gerald Ford, Friele suggested him to “bring into focus some of the recommendations made in your report” in 1969 that were not implemented. Friele argued that the Department of State did not receive the report with any enthusiasm in 1969, but they should review that position due to the deterioration of the US position vis-à-vis other American republics. Friele’s main suggestion was the creation of the position of secretary of Western Hemisphere affairs, an initiative that would have a real and psychological
impact (Friele, 1975).

To sum up, this research report provides evidence that the Rockefeller report was a useful tool for the formulation of Nixon’s foreign policy towards Latin America.

**Endnotes**


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2 Of all the American countries, only Canada and Cuba were not on the initial list to be visited. Chile, Peru, and Venezuela did not receive the mission for different reasons. The most relevant motive for this paper is related to Lima. Peru was governed by Juan Velasco Alvarado starting in October 1968, when he took power through a coup d’état. One of the first measures of Velasco Alvarado’s regime was to expropriate and nationalize the US petroleum company IPC (International Petroleum Company). At the beginning of Nixon’s term, the bilateral relationship was weakened, and, for this reason, the Peruvian government argued that the mission was not welcomed.