Monroe Doctrine Is Vague Anachronism

By SANDY SHENK

How wise is our government’s reference to the Monroe Doctrine in determining and justifying our Latin American policies? What do our neighbors to the south think of this doctrine and consequently what reaction do they have to our references to it?

An article (“Otra Vez la Doctrina Monroe” by Henrique Gonzalez Casanova) on this Monroe Doctrine appeared July 31 on the front page of the “Mexico en la Cultura” section of one of Mexico City’s leading newspapers, Novedades. Because we feel that it gives a good indication of Latin American opinion of this policy, we will try, in two articles, to present its central ideas, translating certain passages:

“The so-called Monroe Doctrine, which according to notable lawyers is not Monroe’s nor is a doctrine, has attracted anew public attention as a consequence of Mr. Kruschev’s declaration that it is dead and Mr. Eisenhowe r’s declaration that it is alive.”

HE QUOTES Isidro Fabelo from Las Doctrinas Monroe y Drago: “Unfortunately for justice and for the weak countries of the New World, the Monroe Doctrine has become in the international history of the United States, not the estimable sentiments of the illustrious president who created it without ulterior intentions for anybody, but an easy expedient which appears and disappears when it is convenient for the White House—which is applied in different ways, not in the spirit of Monroe, but in accord with the political and financial needs of the governments of the Union.”

“...the Monroe Doctrine is undefined and unenforceable, since it not only hasn’t been defined by the U.S. Congress, the only authority in that country capable of doing so, but, even if this had occurred, it would not have the character of international law but of a declaration of unilateral policy of the United States with respect to the countries of Latin America....”

HE OUTLINES the basic propositions of the Doctrine:

“(1) The United States has not intervened nor will intervene in the European colonies already established in America; (2) it will not intervene in the internal affairs of the European powers; (3) it will not permit new colonizations in America; and (4) it will oppose European interventions in the Latin American republics.”

He points out that the second and third of these don’t make sense any more, since the United States is certainly involved in European affairs, and there are no longer territories open to colonization in the New World. He also comments that if there were such territories, the Monroe Doctrine would not defend the country’s right to the world the right to colonize them.

THE FIRST part of the Monroe Doctrine “was violated when the government of McKinley intervened in Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, since both countries were then European colonies established in America...and the Platt amendment was designed to stop Cuba from becoming an independent republic”, leaving it in the status of protectorate until Roosevelt revoked it...”

“This would not be strange at all if these acts of force did not have the spirit of custom, whose governments have declared that they do not seek conquest nor want more land than they have, and that the North American community is the champion of right and justice on the earth!” (inner quotes from Fabelo).

(We might ask to what extent our temporary political control of Cuba facilitated our setting up and profiting from economic control of that island.)

THE FOURTH point, he says, “appears to ratify the old principle of non-intervention, but...had the novelty that Monroe spoke for all the countries of the continent without their representation, and set himself up as their apparent protector without their consent...This part consisted in not tolerating European intervention in Latin America, reserving this faculty for the United States, which has exercised it in several American nations, notably contradicting the sentiments of Monroe, and transgressing in a flagrant manner international law.” (Fabela)”

He lists eleven examples of English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German intervention in Latin America since the doctrine—including, notably, French intervention in Mexico in 1858 and from 1861 to 1867—suggesting that the U.S. did not strongly oppose these moves and that therefore this fourth part of the Doctrine was also not fulfilled.

Interpreting this “reserving the right to intervene in Latin America for the U.S.” as itself contrary to the original spirit of the Monroe Doctrine, he continues:

“OTHER EVENTS which can be considered as violating the Monroe Doctrine are the annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 and the annexation of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming, resulting from the peace treaty which terminated the unjust war initiated in 1847—this war which was advanced by acts of such clear premediation and such cynical provocation that even General Taylor doubted if he should follow the instructions he received. He asked for them to be confirmed, they were, and he carried them out. Mr. Buchanan, Secretary of State at that time, said, ‘There is no other recourse but for us to take compensation for the injuries done to our citizens and for the insults made to our government, in the manner that we have already decided upon.’ The recommendation made to General Taylor is summed up in the following: ‘Do not attack them, but let the first blow be on the part of the Mexicans, in order to make the war more popular in this country, since it will appear that we are attacking because they attack us, insulting our nation and not because we are taking the initiative.’”