

# THE RETREAT FROM IMPERIALISM

(1920–1945)

In the 1920s, the US government moved away from imperialist policies. This was part of both a global trend toward decolonization and a rejection of interventionism by the American public. At a time when Ireland and Poland became independent from control by European powers, the United States began respecting the sovereignty of its Latin American neighbors. “America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force,” announced President Calvin Coolidge in his 1925 inaugural address. Some key developments illustrate the shift in US foreign policy in the 1920s:

- In 1922, US troops left Cuba, concluding the third and final military intervention under the Platt Amendment to restore civil order on the island nation.
- In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge named Dwight Morrow as the US ambassador to Mexico. Morrow led an effort to improve relations with Mexico, beginning by a symbolic change of the embassy’s signage, replacing “American Embassy” with “United States Embassy,” projecting the United States as part of a larger American community. In Mexico, Morrow’s daughter would meet her future husband, celebrity pilot Charles Lindbergh, who would develop a keen interest in US foreign policy.
- In 1928, President-elect Herbert Hoover and his wife, Lou, went on a goodwill tour, visiting ten Latin American countries. The president-elect delivered several speeches, promising that the United States intended to be a “good neighbor.”



*Hoover and his wife on the deck of the U.S.S. Utah*

## FDR’S GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY

The non-interventionist trends established by the Republican presidents of the 1920s continued after Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was inaugurated in 1933. Although FDR was a Democrat, he quickly declared his intention to continue the spirit of Hoover’s foreign policy in the Americas:

In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor — the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others — the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors. (FDR’s First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933)

Roosevelt’s inaugural address made the **Good Neighbor Policy** official. He put words into action when he recalled US troops from Haiti, ending a 19-year occupation of the country. A new treaty with Cuba removed the controversial Platt Amendment, officially renouncing military intervention. This policy shift committed the US government to **Pan-Americanism**, emphasizing voluntary economic cooperation, friendly diplomatic relations, and cultural exchange throughout the Americas. In the 1940s, FDR established an Office for Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) to boost economic cooperation between the United States and its neighbors in the Americas. During World War II, the OIAA used economic incentives and propaganda to limit German and Italian influence in Latin America. Walt Disney was one of many artists and filmmakers who visited Latin America as goodwill ambassadors to promote greater inter-American cooperation.

## CARMEN MIRANDA: CINEMATIC ICON OF PAN-AMERICANISM

The Good Neighbor Policy was reinforced by the incorporation of Pan-American themes into Hollywood cinema. Carmen Miranda, a Brazilian singer and actress, starred in several Hollywood films, including *That Night in Rio* (1941), a musical comedy set in Brazil. While her Hollywood films made her a cultural icon in the United States, she was sometimes criticized in the Brazilian press for reinforcing Latin American stereotypes (she often wore a headdress made out of fruit).

