



Past Shapes the Present

The Banana Wars (1898–1934) and Its Impact on Latin America

Historical Context

The Banana Wars (1898–1934) refer to a series of US military interventions and occupations in Latin America and the Caribbean, primarily aimed at protecting American economic interests, especially those of US fruit companies like United Fruit Company (now Chiquita). These interventions took place in countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. The wars were rooted in US imperialism, economic dominance, and political influence in the region, particularly under the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and Roosevelt Corollary (1905), which justified intervention to maintain stability and protect American businesses. Many of these conflicts involved supporting or installing US-friendly governments, often at the expense of local sovereignty and democracy. The term “Banana Wars” highlights the economic motivations behind these interventions, as many of the affected countries were major exporters of bananas and other goods to the United States. The conflicts ultimately reinforced US dominance in the region and set the stage for later resistance movements (i.e. Haiti, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Guatemala).

Connection to Habit

The Banana Wars were not isolated events but a turning point that shaped US-Latin American relations. Today, some Central and Latin American nations retain political distrust, economic dependency, and nationalist resistance that stem from these historical interventions. Understanding this past helps explain why many Latin American countries remain wary of US influence today.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the person in the image is carrying a big stick? What message is the artist trying to convey?
- How does this image connect to Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy, known as 'Big Stick Diplomacy'?
- Why might the cartoonist have included words like 'Debt Collector' and 'Receiver' on the ships? What do these suggest about US actions in the Caribbean?
- What might the artist be saying about US involvement in Latin America and the Caribbean? Is it shown as positive or negative? Why?
- How do you think this historical event has influenced US relationships with Latin American countries today, specifically the countries pictured in the cartoon?
- Can you think of any modern examples where the United States has intervened in other countries' affairs? How does this compare to what is shown in the cartoon?

Suggested Activity

Materials:

- Printed or digital copies of William Allen Rogers cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick ideology
- Notebook Paper
- Pencil/Pens

Think-Pair-Share [15 minutes]

- Think [5 minutes]:
 - What do you notice in the cartoon? What symbols stand out?
 - Why do you think Roosevelt is carrying a big stick?
 - How does this cartoon connect to the US role in the Banana Wars?
 - Based on what you see, do you think the cartoonist supports or criticizes US intervention? Why?
- Pair [5 minutes]:
 - Students discuss their thoughts with a partner.
- Share [5 minutes]:
 - Pairs share key takeaways with the class.

Primary Source



Source: William Allen Rogers cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick ideology