December 1, 1936: President Franklin Roosevelt Opens the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace

By Pamela Lowry

On December 1, 1936, Franklin Roosevelt gave the keynote address at the opening of a major pan-American conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The world situation was grim, with fascism already in power in Italy and Germany, and threatening to take over Spain, through the conflict known as the “Spanish Civil War.” Because of this looming threat to the Americas, and because a bitter war between Bolivia and Paraguay had raged between 1932 and 1935, Roosevelt focused on encouraging pan-American unity and mechanisms for arbitrating disputes.

He also wanted to make it clear that he was available for mediating between the warring parties in Spain. He wrote after his South American tour that he was “still most pessimistic about events in Europe, and there seems to be no step we can take to improve the situation. Therefore until there is something I can hang my hat on, I must keep away from anything that might result in a rebuff of an offer to help.” For that reason, he kept America neutral in the conflict.

Even before he had been elected to a second term, Roosevelt’s eyes had been on the American republics to the south. He had sent his wife Eleanor on a trip to the Caribbean to scout out conditions there, and she returned with accounts of widespread grinding poverty. Then, on a trip through the Panama Canal to America’s west coast, Roosevelt stopped at Haiti and in Panama
itself.

After that, preparations began for a meeting with the nations of South America. On January 30, 1936, Roosevelt formally proposed to the twenty-one Latin American nations that they send representatives to “an extraordinary inter-American conference…to assemble at any early date, at Buenos Aires…to determine how the maintenance of peace among the American Republics may be best safeguarded…”

Roosevelt laid out his general policy toward Latin America in a speech at Chautauqua, New York on August 14. “The American Republics to the south of us have been ready always to cooperate with the United States on a basis of equality and mutual respect, but before we inaugurated the good-neighbor policy there were among them resentment and fear, because certain Administrations in Washington had slighted their national pride and their sovereign rights.

FDR in Chautauqua, New York (Credit: Chautauguan Daily)
“In pursuance of the good-neighbor policy, and because in my younger days I had learned many lessons in the hard school of experience, I stated that the United States was opposed definitely to armed intervention.

“We have negotiated a Pan-American convention embodying the principle of non-intervention. We have abandoned the Platt Amendment which gave us the right to intervene in the internal affairs of the Republic of Cuba. We have withdrawn American marines from Haiti. We have signed a new treaty which places our relations with Panama on a mutually satisfactory basis. We have undertaken a series of trade agreements with other American countries to our mutual commercial profit. At the request of two neighboring Republics, I hope to give assistance in the final settlement of the last serious boundary dispute between any of the American Nations.”

The conference was scheduled to begin on December 1, so on November 18 President Roosevelt and his staff boarded the USS Indianapolis at Charleston, South Carolina and embarked for the South Atlantic. The ship entered the harbor of Rio de Janeiro on November 27, and Roosevelt’s open car cavalcade through the city was greeted with loud shouts of “Viva la democracia! Viva Roosevelt!” When the President addressed Brazil’s Congress, he told them how when he was a little boy his “first introduction to Brazil” came when his parents took him to Europe and they met, strolling in a park, Emperor Dom Pedro II and his Empress. Dom Pedro and President Ulysses Grant had opened America’s Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, and Dom Pedro had enthusiastically participated in Alexander Graham Bell’s demonstration of the first telephone.

Roosevelt then explained that although he was going to address the conference in Argentina, he had felt he had to tender his respects to Brazil, “with which for more than a century we have maintained a tradition of good understanding, mutual regard, and cooperation, which is rare in history.” He
continued by saying that “if in the generations to come we can live without war, democratic government throughout the Americas will prove its complete ability to raise the standards of life for those millions who cry for opportunity today. The motto of war is: ‘Let the strong survive; let the weak die.’ The motto of peace is: ‘Let the strong help the weak to survive.’”

On November 30, the Presidential party landed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where two million Argentines greeted him enthusiastically and showered him with flowers as he passed. Roosevelt wrote to his wife that “the moral effect of the Good Neighbor policy is making itself definitely felt.” The next morning, Franklin Roosevelt formally opened the Inter-American conference and called upon the delegates to develop “mechanisms of peace” which would make any war between American nations impossible, and would enable the American nations to help Europe “avert its impending catastrophe of war.”

In his keynote address, Roosevelt stated that “In this Western Hemisphere the night of fear has been dispelled. Many of the intolerable burdens of economic depression have been lightened and, due in no small part to our common efforts, every Nation of this Hemisphere is today at peace with its neighbors.”
FDR Launches his "Good Neighbor Policy" while in Argentina in 1936. Seated here with President Vargas of Brazil. (Wiki)

“This is no conference to form alliances, to divide the spoils of war, to partition countries, to deal with human beings as though they were pawns in a game of chance. Our purpose, under happy auspices, is to assure the continuance of the blessings of peace.....”

“Can we, the Republics of the New World, help the Old World to avert the catastrophe which impends? Yes; I am confident that we can. First, it is our duty by every honorable means to prevent any future war among ourselves....Secondly, and in addition to the perfecting of the mechanism of peace, we can strive even more strongly than in the past to prevent the creation of those conditions which give rise to war. Lack of social or political justice within the borders of any Nation is always cause for concern. Through democratic processes we can strive to achieve for the Americas the highest possible
standard of living conditions for all our people. Men and women blessed with political freedom, willing to work and able to find work, rich enough to maintain their families and to educate their children, contented with their lot in life and on terms of friendship with their neighbors, will defend themselves to the utmost, but will never consent to take up arms for a war of conquest...."

“Three centuries of history sowed the seeds which grew into our Nations; the fourth century saw those Nations become equal and free and brought us to a common system of constitutional government; the fifth century is giving to us a common meeting ground of mutual help and understanding. Our Hemisphere has at last come of age. We are here assembled to show its unity to the world. We took from our ancestors a great dream. We here offer it back as a great unified reality...."

“The faith of the Americas, therefore, lies in the spirit. The system, the sisterhood, of the Americas is impregnable so long as her Nations maintain that spirit. In that faith and spirit we will have peace over the Western World. In that faith and spirit we will all watch and guard our Hemisphere. In that faith and spirit may we also, with God’s help, offer hope to our brethren overseas.”

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