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THE ATTITUDE OF THE UNITED STATES TOWARD  
THE RETENTION BY EUROPEAN NATIONS OF  
COLONIES IN AND AROUND THE CARIBBEAN

BY

WILLIAM R. SHEPHERD

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

REPRINTED FROM  
PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
ACADEMY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
Vol. VII, No. 2

NEW YORK  
PUBLISHED BY THE  
ACADEMY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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OF COLONIES IN AND AROUND THE  
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WILLIAM R. SHEPHERD

Professor of History, Columbia University

**E**AST and south of the United States of America stretches a long chain of insular and continental areas belonging to Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. One end of it is anchored in the ocean, 580 miles east of North Carolina; the other is wedged into Central America, midway between Florida and Texas, 450 miles to the southward. Starting at Bermuda and extending down to the north coast of South America, the chain runs through hundreds of islands, which if pieced together, would about equal Connecticut and New Jersey combined, thence through the Guianas, a region much larger than California, and around to British Honduras, a territory not far from the size of New Hampshire. The entire Caribbean area would just about fit into the New England and Middle Atlantic states, plus West Virginia.

In these dependencies of island and mainland live some 2,750,000 people, about as many as Indiana contains in an area less than one fifth as large. A more extraordinary mixture of races, colors and religions, a more singular juxtaposition of oriental and occidental, of folk from Europe, Africa, Asia and the South Sea Isles, all brought face to face in America, it would be hard to find anywhere in the world. Beneath the thin crust of a few thousand whites, of British, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese origin, are massed millions of negroes and mulattoes, hundreds of thousands of Hindus, tens of thousands of Javanese, and thousands of Chinese, Siamese and

<sup>1</sup> Address delivered at the National Conference on Foreign Relations of the United States, held under the auspices of the Academy of Political Science, at Long Beach, N. Y., May 30, 1917.

Indians. Here are black, brown, red and yellow Christians, Mohammedans and Jews, devotees of Brahma and Buddha, followers of Confucius, and worshippers of nature, transplanted from Africa and Asia, made dwellers in America, and yet owning allegiance to European masters.

The future of these lands and peoples is a matter of vital concern to the United States. The reason for it lies in the observance of the sound national principle that small areas located near the territory of a great power should belong to it, rather than to a distant country. Were such areas actually independent states having a strong national life, states whose achievements had long since won the respect and recognition of the world at large, as is true of several of the small countries of Europe, the principle, obviously, would be altogether inapplicable. Where, however, these conditions are not fulfilled, as in the case of the chain of insular and continental dependencies in America, extending all the way around from Bermuda to British Honduras, inclusive, the principle seems clearly befitting. In its application to this collective territory three parties are concerned, and three sets of interests would have to be adjusted. The parties are the United States, the present European owners, and the colonial inhabitants themselves. The interests have to do with the position of the United States as the chief among American nations; with the strengthening of the bonds of friendship between this country and Great Britain, France and the Netherlands, and with the welfare of the dependent peoples in question.

The Caribbean Sea is the gateway to the Panama Canal. Until recently there were four links in the European chain across its entrance. One of them has been acquired through the purchase of the islands from Denmark. Sooner or later the other three links must pass into the possession of the United States, and the Caribbean Sea be made into an American lake. Manifest destiny, the natural course of things, or whatever the term that may be used to mark the tendency of great powers to round out their defensible frontiers, will determine the matter in any event. If so, it behooves American diplomacy to start taking stock of the future. In the Carib-

bean region, and wherever else in fact American interests are vitally concerned, the United States should adopt as soon as practicable a definite policy, and abandon once and for all the drifting opportunism that only too often in recent years has characterized our foreign relations.

Now, just as there are three parties and three sets of interests involved, so there are three circumstances that should determine the attitude of the United States toward the retention by European nations of colonies in and around the Caribbean. The first circumstance is, that we need those areas ourselves; the second is, that the European owners do not; and the third is a natural consequence of the two preceding, namely, that the owners ought to turn them over to us for the good of all concerned.

Geographically the Caribbean colonies, using the expression broadly, belong to the American continents. Because nature happened to separate them by water is no reason why nations should separate them by claims, from the region of which they are properly a part. Because of their nearness to the territory of the United States and to the Panama Canal, and because of their remoteness from the territory of their possessors, this country has, and ought to have, a paramount interest in their destiny, both for its own sake and for theirs. Naturally and strategically a part of the United States, they are a potential menace to its welfare and security so long as they remain under European control.

At this point the objection may be raised, that neither to the United States nor to the Panama Canal is the slightest danger likely to arise from the fact that the colonies are the property of Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. The present relationship of this country to the two great powers in question, and our historic friendship with France above all, are a guaranty sufficient in itself to ward off any apprehensions about the future. It is inconceivable that either of them would ever attack the United States.

In reply to these contentions one may freely admit that, if no possible danger could exist that the Caribbean colonies would ever be used as a base of hostile operations against this

country, they might be left in the hands of their present owners. Obviously, however, this assurance cannot be guaranteed, no matter what the sentiment now prevailing between the United States and the three European nations in question. "It is a maxim, founded on the universal experience of mankind," wrote Washington in 1778, "that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest; and no prudent statesman or politician will venture to depart from it." International agreements and understandings are too easily changed under the pressure of new circumstances to justify a placid confidence in the notion that the hopes and desires of today are bound to become the absolute certainties of tomorrow. It was inconceivable that the Great War and all its horrors, with all the fundamental readjustments it has wrought in ideas, relationships, values and sympathies, could have happened. The inconceivable has happened, and will continue to happen just as long as men and affairs in this world are subject to change, with or without warning. But surely the United States need not be afraid of the little Netherlands. Neither was it afraid of little Denmark, yet it bought the Danish West Indies, nevertheless, for motives of prudence and a considerable sum in cash! Though we feared nothing from Denmark, of course, we could not be sure but that some power stronger, and in a position to be more ambitious, than that worthy bit of Scandinavia, might become interested in insular real estate near the American coast. Preparing for things possibly eventual, therefore, is a safer and wiser practice than dreaming about things presumably inconceivable.

The Panama Canal, be it said, was not constructed as an evidence merely of American facility in severing continents and uniting oceans. Neither was it built solely as a convenient economizer of time and space for the world's commerce. It is an American highway put through by American brains, American labor and American money for the general good of mankind in time of peace, and for the specific good of the United States in time of war. With the freedom of the seas it is free and correspondingly neutral; but so long as it is easily open to attack from islands and continental areas near by, which

belong to European countries at a time when the seas happen not to be free, it is neither neutral nor properly subject to neutralization.

The Caribbean areas resemble a huge pair of dividers or pincers, between the points or nippers of which are thirty degrees of latitude and thirty-eight degrees of longitude, and the head or handle of which rests on the Guianas. To be sure, we have certain islands lying in the region which can obstruct any tendency on the part of the dividers or pincers to close down on American land or American water; but obstruction is not by any means so effective a safeguard against seizure or compression by the big pliers, as would be our downright ownership of the pliers.

Here again it might be suggested that, instead of seeking to obtain possession of the Caribbean colonies as a measure of strategic defense for the Panama Canal, the United States should endeavor to ward off foreign cupidity by having the waterway neutralized. Such a suggestion, however, coming in the light of recent experience in the eastern hemisphere, takes on the garb of the things that were supposed to be inconceivable. Neutralization as applied on the continent of Europe, certainly, has been honored far more in the breach than in the observance. And in the case of the Suez Canal, which was guaranteed, by solemn international agreements in 1888 and 1904, open to the ships of all nations alike in war and in peace, neutralization since 1914 has not been especially noticeable. German, Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian and Turkish vessels have found it quite impracticable as a neutral route to India and beyond! Until that happy day shall dawn, therefore, when freedom of the seas is something more than a rhetorical expression, when it has actually the same meaning in war that it has in peace, and when the neutralized Suez Canal stays neutralized in both periods, then it will be feasible to discuss the neutralization of the Panama Canal. By that time, let us hope, the stars and stripes will wave over the European colonies in and around the Caribbean; and we shall not have to worry about the safety of our southern waterway.



But the people of the United States have something more to consider than their territory and their canal. Nature and history have appointed us protectors, under the Monroe Doctrine, of twenty sister republics in America. Prudence and foresight, accordingly, require that anything in the shape of a potential danger to them or to ourselves ought to be removed in peaceable fashion, whenever a suitable opportunity offers itself to that end.

Valuable though the West Indian region may have been for economic and political reasons to Great Britain, France and the Netherlands, it ceased long ago to occupy an important place in their national affairs. No elaborate demonstration is needed to show that what was of service to them in the eighteenth century is of small account today. At that time the United States was a tiny republic whose chances for permanence and development were thought highly doubtful; now it is one of the great powers of earth. It holds, furthermore, a unique position, in that it has become altogether the paramount nation in one hemisphere, whereas its fellows contend among themselves for supremacy in the other. This status of leadership in the New World the United States is bound to maintain, in the interest of the Americas at large no less than in its own.

The Monroe Doctrine laid down three fairly definite principles that constitute a special phase of our relationship to the Latin American countries and to the powers of Europe and Asia. As properly interpreted and expanded since their enunciation in 1823, they have been made to forbid the transference of territory owned by an American republic to a non-American country, and to forbid even the temporary occupation of any part of an American republic by a non-American country on any pretext whatever. All this has been done in the interest of the *pax Americana*, of an intercontinental peace that shall keep the Americas free from an extension to them and among them of troubles born of Europe.

For the welfare of the United States and its sister republics American soil is not available for future European or Asiatic colonization. Now, as the centennial anniversary of the

Monroe Doctrine draws near, the change in circumstances toward the close of a hundred years would seem to justify us in seeking to have the peace of the Americas further assured. This can be done through a friendly agreement with the countries concerned, whereby the future retention by European nations of colonies in and around the Caribbean shall no longer be a source of possible disquiet, either for ourselves or for our Latin American neighbors.

Instead of causing the Monroe Doctrine thereby to be abandoned, or even ignored, as some objectors might urge, such a procedure as the one suggested would, on the contrary, carry it out to its logical conclusion. By the actual terms of the doctrine the European colonies in America existing at the time of its pronouncement were to remain in the hands of their owners; but the underlying presumption must have been that this retention was a temporary matter, and hence subject to discontinuance whenever feasible. If this be true, the acquisition of the Caribbean areas in question by the United States would serve to round out the Monroe Doctrine by making its basic idea, that of the eventual exclusion of non-American political power over American soil, a reality, and the thought of "America for the Americans," an accomplished fact.

That the retirement of the European nations from the Caribbean and, in consequence, their replacement by the United States, might intensify the fear of "Yankee imperialism" among the Latin American republics, is possible in the case of those lying in that sea, or bordering upon the western part of it, but highly improbable so far as the countries to the southward are concerned. The insular republics, certainly, and some of those in Central America, have already lost their independence in some degree, as the process of financial, police and sanitary control, along with the extension of the commercial influence of the United States, goes, glacier-like, slowly onward. Were the European colonies in their neighborhood to be acquired by this country, the effect, conceivably, might be that of giving an impetus to the present policy of establishing quasi-protectorates over the republics in question, as the most suitable

means of providing for their welfare and security. On the other hand, the great progressive Latin American states, those possessing the elements needful for an efficient national development, have no reason to worry about the outcome of this particular phase of manifest destiny; nor is it likely that, in any essential respect, they would feel much concerned. Apart from sentimental considerations, more or less vague, arising out of the relationships of colonial times, they have comparatively scant interest in the affairs of the small, backward republics of Spanish or French speech lying in and around the Caribbean. For the insular and continental dependencies of Great Britain, France and the Netherlands in the same area, to which no such considerations are applicable, their concern would be much less still. Indeed, if the United States were to obtain these dependencies in peaceable fashion, the chief Latin American nations might be inclined rather to approve the action, as a final step in realizing the fundamental concept of the Monroe Doctrine to which they subscribe.

The United States, moreover, has associated itself with the Allies in their war against the Central Powers. Representatives of Great Britain and France have besought our aid in ships, men, money and supplies. If they, in common with their supporters in Europe and their Far Eastern ally, Japan, are waging the war wholly for altruistic purposes, if they expect no advantage, other than the knowledge that liberty, democracy, humanity and civilization shall have been won for the world at large, then the United States surely can afford to imitate their example. On the other hand, if Great Britain and France are to derive material compensation from a victory rendered certain by the opportune aid of the United States, it is only fair and just that, in accordance with terms acceptable to all parties concerned, they turn over their Caribbean possessions to this country as a fitting token of gratitude for our support.

In the case of the Netherlands the precedent already set by the purchase of the islands from Denmark could be applied to the acquisition of the Dutch territories. At this point, however, a financial *caveat* must be entered. Preliminary to our

participation in the war we paid Denmark \$25,000,000 for 138 square miles of insular land. Since the Dutch West Indies spread over 46,463 square miles, were they to be acquired at the same rate, as a possible outcome of the war, they would cost about \$8,500,000,000, which is somewhat more than we could afford! Accordingly, whenever the moment for negotiation comes, we shall have to arrange for a different basis of adjustment, as for example, one determined by the amount of the subsidies which the Dutch government has to pay each year into the colonial treasuries.

Returning to the consideration of the British and French aspect of the matter, one meets with two classes of objections. Some will assert that it is unfair to take advantage of Great Britain and France, distressed by the devastation of a war waged, not alone in their own behalf, but in defense of the United States as well. Whether in fact they have been defending this country, must be left to the verdict of history when the war is over. Many of us, at all events, believe this to be true. On the other hand, it is probably just as true that, without the aid we have already furnished and shall continue to furnish, Great Britain and France could not have defended themselves alone, to say nothing of the United States. To pledge the colonies in and around the Caribbean, accordingly, as a return for aid extended, is not to take advantage of national distress; it is a plain business proposition, like the extension of the aid itself.

Other objections to the plan proposed will maintain that, even if Great Britain and France should receive ample compensation in territory and money as the reward of victory, that is no reason why the United States should do so. Our aims, they will assert, are and ought to be purely idealistic, and hence free from material considerations of any sort. Let the European nations and Japan take what they can get; as for ourselves, we shall take nothing. Unfortunately for the force of such a contention, however, this grimly practical world is not run on the basis that virtue is its own reward. Sentiment and emotion may shape the thoughts of individuals amid the multitudes, but they do not determine the course of action followed

by the soldiers in the field, and by the statesmen seated around the green cloth table, who are called upon to decide what is best for their country. If the European nations and Japan are to secure means for their material advancement as a result of this war, the essential interests of the United States require it to obtain similar advantages for itself.

Assuming that these objections have been overcome, four more of them are likely to be encountered. In the first place, Great Britain, France and the Netherlands would never be willing to turn over their colonies in and around the Caribbean to the United States, no matter how much we may want them to do so. Second, the colonies are better off in their present situation than they would be under American direction. Third, we have no desire, either to increase the burden of our race problem by trying to govern two millions and more of colored peoples, or to enlarge tasks already great enough, by the duty of protecting a large number of scattered islands and parts of continents. In the last place, areas so famous for earthquakes and hurricanes are probably not worth the trouble and expense needful for their acquisition. Of these objections, the first is a pure assumption; the second is like unto it; the third ignores what we have done so successfully both in Porto Rico and the Philippines; and the fourth is erroneous.

As colonization is carried on today, the real test of the right of a European nation to retain control of American territories, like those in and around the Caribbean, is determined, not alone by their actual utility to the nation in question, but by the amount of service thus rendered to their inhabitants. For many years past Great Britain, France and the Netherlands have centered their oversea activities in the eastern hemisphere, in Africa, Asia, Australia and Polynesia. The islands and parts of continents they hold in the Caribbean region are little more than relics of ancient grandeur, burdensome rather than a source of advantage. No sentimental value worth mentioning attaches to these areas. Few Englishmen, Frenchmen or Dutchmen reside in them longer than is necessary for commercial purposes. Possibly the colonies may have some strategic value to their owners as naval bases. If so,

against what power? This is an obvious question that has an obvious answer—the United States. In that case no doubt remains as to our duty in the premises!

Practically all the Caribbean colonies have fallen long since into a state of absolute or relative neglect. Their population either crowds the means of subsistence or tends steadily to fall off. That any of the areas flourish at all is due mainly to their connection with the United States and to the introduction of Asiatics for work on the plantations. The trade of the British possessions with this country is worth upwards of \$4,000,000 a year more than that with Great Britain itself, and if British Guiana is excepted, more than \$13,000,000. In the case of British Guiana the reason for the larger amount of commerce carried on with the mother country is found in the labor of Asiatics. Both here and in Jamaica, as well as in the French and Dutch colonies, the practice of using orientals prevails. However legitimate the bringing over to America of Hindus, Japanese, Siamese and Chinese by the tens and hundreds of thousands may seem to the British, Dutch and French owners of the Caribbean region, it is altogether opposed to the principles which the United States has steadfastly championed in defense of the American workingman. Legitimate it may be in point of law, though not in point of morals; for its object is, not the advancement of civilization in the areas concerned, but solely the exploitation of them by the agency of cheap labor.

Railroads, furthermore, almost unknown in the islands, are relatively much scarcer still in the continental sections. British Guiana, which is somewhat smaller than Oregon, has 97½ miles of railway, run on three different gauges; British Honduras has 25 miles; Dutch Guiana, about as big as New York—for which, by the way, it was exchanged back in 1667—has 104 miles, whereas French Guiana, a bit larger than Maine, has no railways at all. Both the French and the Dutch colonies show a declining commerce and they are dependent, also, for their financial existence upon annual subsidies furnished by the home government. To recognize therefore that, economically at least, the British territories already form

part of the United States, and to relieve the taxpayers of France and the Netherlands of the burden of meeting the deficits of their backward dependencies in America, would not seem on the face of it an unwelcome act.

Nor is this all of the story. None of the British colonies in and around the Caribbean enjoys self-government in anything like the measure of it accorded to Canada and Newfoundland. So far as the privilege is granted at all, the people thus favored stand more or less on a level with the inhabitants of India. In the French and Dutch areas the situation is worse. Even if the French colonists are represented in the home parliament, the representation is illusory rather than otherwise, whereas the folk under Dutch rule have to depend on what the good queen sends them. Whatever the amount of attention, also, given to education in the British possessions, it is pitifully scant among their French and Dutch neighbors. In partial compensation for the drawbacks, however, many of the inhabitants speak English after the American fashion, and use dollars and cents more commonly than they do pounds, shillings and pence, francs and guilders!

Given these circumstances, it seems clear that, taken as a whole, the colonies in and around the Caribbean are a loss to the European nations that own them, and a detriment to the people who live in them. Were they to be made, instead, a part of the United States in the political sense, as essentially they already are a part of it in the geographical, linguistic and economic sense, their lot would be a happier one, and so would ours. Were they to be included in the American union, there is every reason to believe that the benefits which have followed the American occupation of Porto Rico would be extended to them also. What we have accomplished in nineteen years for the material, mental and moral advantage of that island and its American citizenry, needs no expatiation here, for the evidence is too well known. If the destinies of the Caribbean colonies, therefore, were committed to our charge, we could assure to their inhabitants an interest in their welfare which the countries now ruling them cannot possibly display.

And what have the Caribbean islands and the mainland to offer us? They have many an excellent harbor. They afford an outlet for the surplus population of Porto Rico. They are rich in the natural resources of the tropics, which we shall need in ever-increasing amount. The more these resources are developed, the greater becomes the market for our manufactures. American railways in the Guianas would open to the Caribbean seaboard the treasures of the Amazon valley. Benign in climate and beautiful in scenery, the Caribbean islands have extraordinary possibilities as winter resorts. Nor are they lacking in historic interest. Among the islands and on the Spanish Main were laid the scenes in song and story of the brave old times of the pirate and buccaneer, of the age-long struggle in former days of the states of Europe for dominion in the New World.

Assuming that, in view of all the foregoing, Great Britain, France and the Netherlands shall have signified a willingness to relinquish their ownership of the Caribbean colonies in favor of the United States, we might set a worthy example of our belief in the principle that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. The American people think that small nationalities ought to have the right to determine their own destinies. If their conditions are such as to make independence desirable, they should be independent; if not, then they should be permitted to choose the allegiance under which they shall live. That in any correct or reasonable sense of the term the people dwelling in the Caribbean colonies can be called "nationalities," however, is altogether doubtful. No one has ever thought of regarding them in that light; for they possess few, if any, of the qualifications requisite for that distinction. Dependent they always have been, and dependent they are likely to remain, since the conditions for independence are lacking. Accordingly, if the several areas they inhabit were to be transferred from their present owners to the United States by virtue of an agreement between the two parties concerned, the act in itself could not be construed as a violation of the American principle of championing the cause of small nations. Yet, in order to remove any possible hesita-



tion on this point, whenever the moment for the ultimate disposal of the Caribbean colonies arrives, the question whether they should be placed under the protection of the stars and stripes might be resolved, if practicable, in democratic fashion, by leaving it to the decision of the people themselves. That they would vote right on a matter that affects so intimately their welfare and progress cannot be doubted.







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