In his famous first inaugural address of March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt committed his administration to "the policy of the good neighbor." The good neighbor, FDR explained, "resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others." FDR was referring to the tenor of U.S. foreign policy in general, but the phrase "good neighbor" soon became associated specifically with U.S. policy toward Latin America.

In embracing the Good Neighbor Policy, FDR and his secretary of state, Cordell Hull, signaled their intention to move away from a pattern of heavy-handed intervention in the domestic affairs of Central American and Caribbean nations, often in small-scale "Banana Wars" to protect U.S. economic interests. Instead the United States would take an approach based on mutual recognition and cooperation.

While promoting nonintervention, free trade, and mutual defense, the policy raised the profile of U.S.–Latin American relations in general, for the first time emphasizing the New World as an important locus of international exchange. FDR made frequent visits to Latin American countries, becoming...
the first sitting president to visit South America when he traveled to Cartagena, Colombia, in 1934. “We, the citizens of all the American Republics, are, I think, at the threshold of a new era,” FDR said in Colombia. “It is a new era because of the new spirit of understanding that is best expressed in the phrase, ‘Let us each and every one of us live and let live.’”

Though America’s predominance in economic and military affairs meant it would continue to hold the upper hand in the Western Hemisphere, the Good Neighbor Policy was popular in the United States and Latin America alike, vastly improving relations between the two.

The Roosevelt administration held up this policy, coupled with the strong relationship it cultivated with Canada, as an exemplar of international cooperation among sovereign states—and a sharp contrast to the aggressive foreign policies of Italy, Germany, and Japan in the years leading up to World War II. FDR hoped this example might help to head off world war. “Can we, the Republics of the New World, help the Old World to avert the catastrophe which impends?” he asked at a 1936 diplomatic conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina. “Yes; I am confident that we can.”

It was not to be. But the principles established in the Good Neighbor Policy did help lay the basis for the United Nations, founded after the war. In 1948 this policy would find new life in the establishment of the Organization of American States, which continues to foster neighborly relations among nations of the Western Hemisphere in the twenty-first century.

Above: Franklin D. Roosevelt with Josephus Daniels in Washington, DC, 1940. Daniels had been FDR’s superior when the former was assistant secretary of the navy from 1913 to 1920. Despite a rocky start, Daniels would help FDR implement the Good Neighbor Policy as U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1933 to 1941. FDRL

Left: Carmen Miranda, a Portuguese-born Brazilian entertainer popular in the United States, was a “goodwill ambassador” whose films evoked the theme of inter-American unity promoted by the Good Neighbor Policy. She helped introduce U.S. audiences to Latin American culture, although not all Latin Americans were happy with her portrayals.
A shift in U.S. policy toward Latin America first became apparent at the Pan-American Conference of December 1933 in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. Here, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull’s leadership, the United States signed the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. The international agreement stated unequivocally that “no state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another.” Under the convention the nineteen signatories agreed that they would not recognize territorial gains made by force and that all disputes should be settled peacefully. Although the United States attached a reservation that had the potential to be used to justify intervention, FDR and Hull took the occasion to formally announce the Good Neighbor Policy.

In keeping with the new policy, in 1934 the Roosevelt administration repealed the so-called Platt Amendment of 1901, which had allowed unilateral U.S. involvement in Cuba. It also ended a two-decade-long U.S. occupation of Haiti.

Four years later came a major challenge to the Good Neighbor Policy when the Mexican government nationalized the nation’s oil industry, seizing the assets of American oil companies operating in the country. Crying foul, many American business leaders in the oil industry and elsewhere called for U.S. intervention. But FDR refused, instead ordering the State Department to negotiate a compensation plan.

Aurelio Escobar Castellanos Archive

Right: Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas del Río. Cárdenas was a social reformer and admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. He was a controversial figure in the United States, especially when he nationalized Mexico’s oil reserves in 1938, seizing the assets of American oil companies operating there. FDR refused to undermine Cárdenas’s leadership authority, instead ordering the State Department to negotiate compensation for the seized assets.

Above: Franklin D. Roosevelt receives Haitian president Sténio Vincent, far left, at the White House in 1934. That year, FDR completed the withdrawal of a nineteen-year American occupation of Haiti, launched during a period of instability in the country to protect U.S. economic and military interests there. LOC

Above: Franklin D. Roosevelt addresses the governing board of the Pan-American Union (later called the Organization of American States) on April 5, 1940. The twenty-one American republics, he said, must be ready to “meet force with force” if their system of peaceful relations were challenged from without. “Whoever touches any one of us touches us all,” he said. LOC
Trade among Neighbors

The Good Neighbor Policy sought economic development and prosperity not by dominating foreign countries militarily but by knocking down trade barriers. In 1934 Congress passed the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, giving the president the power to adjust tariffs and negotiate bilateral trade agreements. This would spawn agreements with nearly a dozen Latin American countries, as well as with Canada and several European countries, by the close of the 1930s. U.S. trade with Latin America increased.
Security among Neighbors

In March 1935, Hitler ominously repudiated the Versailles Treaty signed after World War I and began to remilitarize Germany. In October Mussolini invaded the fertile African country of Abyssinia (today’s Ethiopia), defying the League of Nations, of which it was a member. These troubling events on the other side of the world inspired Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull to add a new dimension to the Good Neighbor Policy—the preservation of peace and security in the Western Hemisphere.

FDR called the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace “to determine how the peace of the American Republics may best be safeguarded.” The conference, which took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December 1936, committed the countries of the Americas to consult with one another to find a nonviolent solution whenever the peace of the Western Hemisphere was threatened, whether from within or without. FDR addressed the conference as part of his “Good Neighbor Cruise” of Latin America begun in the fall of that year.

As the situation in Europe and Asia spiraled toward chaos, further Pan-American gatherings took place in 1938 in Lima, Peru—where the American nations agreed to resist “all foreign intervention or activity”—and again in 1939 in Panama City, Panama, and 1949 in Havana, Cuba. At Panama, the American republics agreed to observe a three-hundred-mile “neutrality zone” around the coastlines of the Western Hemisphere (except for Canada and European colonies in the Caribbean) that belligerent ships should not enter. In Havana, just weeks after the Nazi conquest of the Netherlands and the fall of France, the American republics pledged to oppose the transfer or change in sovereignty of territory anywhere in the Western Hemisphere (including European colonies) as a result of the European war.

After the United States entered the war, cooperation established under the Good Neighbor Policy continued. A significant number of the Latin American republics declared war against the Axis in 1942, and by 1945, all had done so, including Argentina, which, in spite of pressure from Washington, DC, had remained neutral for most of the war.

“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.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, at the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires, December 1, 1936

Above, left: Franklin D. Roosevelt reviews the Argentine fleet on his trip to South America aboard the USS Indianapolis, November 1936. During the upcoming conference in Buenos Aires and in the following years the “American family of nations,” as FDR put it, would agree to mutual protection against violations of national sovereignty. FDRL

Above: The USS Indianapolis, the vessel that carried Franklin D. Roosevelt on his “Good Neighbor Cruise” of South America in November and December of 1936. Navy Department Library
The Good Neighbor Policy and Mexico

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy had significant impact on relations between the United States and its nearest neighbor to the south, Mexico.

Determined to establish and maintain a rapport with Mexico, FDR appointed Josephus Daniels as U.S. ambassador to the country when he became president in March 1933. This appointment struck many as surprising. As U.S. secretary of the navy while FDR served as assistant secretary from 1913 to 1920, Daniels had been FDR’s boss, and the two had not always seen eye to eye on policy matters. In addition, Daniels had been the official charged with carrying out President Woodrow Wilson’s orders to dispatch the navy to occupy the Mexican state of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico in 1914. This intervention in the Mexican Revolution had not been popular in Mexico, and Daniels’s arrival there as ambassador was marred by protests outside the American embassy and a cool reception by Mexican officials.

But Daniels quickly established himself as one of the most effective and well-regarded ambassadors in the history of U.S.-Mexican relations. In this, he was helped greatly by FDR, who remained steadfast in his determination to maintain a policy of nonintervention in the affairs of sovereign American states, articulated and agreed to at the Pan-American Conference of December 1933 in Montevideo, Uruguay.

The election of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río as president of Mexico in 1934 also seemed auspicious for the future of U.S.-Mexican relations. As a social reformer who admired FDR’s New Deal, Cárdenas instigated a number of policies and programs aimed at improving the lives of the Mexican people. He instituted land reform, promoted a secular public education system, and established workers’ cooperatives that would help Mexico’s industrial laborers secure better wages and working conditions.

Not surprisingly, however, American corporate leaders doing business in Mexico regarded Cárdenas’s workers’ rights reforms with alarm. His government’s efforts to abolish religious education, meanwhile, were widely viewed by American Catholics as an attack on the Church. By the spring of 1935, Americans opposed to Cárdenas’s education reform had launched a vigorous campaign to reverse this policy by demanding the recall of Ambassador Daniels and by attempting to pressure the U.S. Congress into launching an investigation into alleged religious persecution in Mexico.

A 1943 poster issued by the U.S. Office of War Information to promote inter-ethnic solidarity in the American war effort. In a domestic application of the principles of the Good Neighbor Policy, the government reached into Spanish-speaking neighborhoods with the message that people of Mexican descent were welcome—and needed—in defense industry jobs, the armed services, war-bond drives, and other activities of the cause. Leon Helguera

FDR flatly refused to support these initiatives, however, insisting that he would not permit his government “to undertake a policy of interference in the domestic concerns of foreign governments” that would
“jeopardize the maintenance of peaceful relations.” FDR found support for this stance in Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago and other prominent American Catholics. Like FDR, these leaders understood that in an era of increasing international aggression in Europe and Asia, it was important for the United States to do all it could to promote amity among nations in its own hemisphere.

By the end of the year, the Mexican government had moderated its religious policies and contention over religious education in Mexico faded.

But President Cárdenas would present perhaps the most serious challenge to the Good Neighbor Policy in 1938, when he ordered his government to nationalize the Mexican oil industry, seizing the assets of British and American oil companies operating in the country. Cárdenas took this action in the wake of a long-running labor dispute and a decision by the Mexican Supreme Court in support of Mexican oil workers’ demand for higher wages. Furious, the American oil industry and wider business community reacted by calling for U.S. intervention. Once again, FDR refused, and he instead ordered the State Department to negotiate a plan of compensation for the seized assets.

In doing so, FDR helped preserve the Good Neighbor Policy, making it easier for the United States to maintain its position of leadership in the Western Hemisphere at a time when concerns over the belligerent behavior of Germany, Italy, and Japan had reached new heights. President Cárdenas certainly understood this, publicly declaring that FDR, by “reaffirming the sovereignty of the peoples of this continent,” had won the esteem of the Mexican people.

The success of FDR’s policy of restraint became apparent after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. As dictators in Europe and Asia violated national borders at will and viciously subdued populations, the United States and Mexico reached an unparalleled level of friendship. To mark these exemplary relations with America’s close neighbor, FDR traveled to Mexico in April 1943 to engage in the first face-to-face meeting between an American and Mexican president in thirty-four years. Addressing President Cárdenas’s successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho, FDR observed,

The great Mexican people have their feet set upon a path of ever greater progress so that each Nation may enjoy and each citizen may enjoy the greatest possible measure of security and opportunity. The Government of the United States and my countrymen are ready to contribute to that progress.

We recognize a mutual interdependence of our joint resources. We know that Mexico’s resources will be developed for the common good of humanity. We know that the day of the exploitation of the resources and the people of one country for the benefit of any group in another country is definitely over.

It is time that every citizen in every one of the American Republics recognizes that the Good Neighbor policy means that harm to one Republic means harm to each and every one of the other Republics. We have all of us recognized the principle of independence. It is time that we recognize also the privilege of interdependence—one upon another. . . .

We have achieved close understanding and unity of purpose, and I am grateful to you, Mr. President, and to the Mexican people, for this opportunity to meet you on Mexican soil, and—to call you friends.

Above: Mexican workers brought to America to harvest sugar beets under the so-called bracero program, May 1943. The guest-worker program launched in 1942 by a U.S.-Mexico agreement was designed to address wartime farm labor shortages. By the time the program ended in 1964, some 4.6 million contracts had been issued to Mexican braceros (laborers) permitting them to come to work in America temporarily. LOC

Left: Josephus Daniels as secretary of the navy (a post he held from 1913 to 1921) decorating marine heroes. Franklin D. Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the navy, is at left. FDR appointed Daniels U.S. ambassador to Mexico in 1933. LOC