

# Say No to Monroe

I strain for words to describe adequately Washington's policy toward Latin America. Candidates come to mind: imbecilic, moronic, catatonic, Pollyannaish, blind,

incurious. No, these are poor creatures and frail, not equal to the task. Retarded? Anencephalic? Those too lack descriptive power. The EEG has flat-lined. The patient is dead.

I recently found the following from McClatchey news service: "As the Pentagon eyes a bigger role in Mexico's drug war..."

Book me a ticket to Mars. The Pentagon is eyeing something, a sure recipe for disaster. Let's get involved in another Third World catastrophe by meddling in what we don't understand.

Continues McClatchey: "During a trip designed to expand U.S. Mexican-military relations, Adm. Michael Mullen, the highest-ranking U.S. military officer, visited the graves of American troops who died during the Mexican-American War just as Gates did during his first visit in August."

How stupid can you get? To improve relations with the Mexican army, we rub their noses in having defeated them.

Let me explain something. To Mexicans, the U.S. is not a friendly nation. The reasons are countless, some valid and some not, but Mexicans do not see America as benign. They fear the U.S. military, which they regard as out of control, invading country after country in pursuit of oil.

Mexico has oil. America lost control of it in 1938 when Lazaro Cardenas nationalized it. Mexicans believe, in dead seriousness, that the U.S. would love a pretext for invading to get it back—a pretext such as coming in to help Mexico fight drugs, then just not

leaving. Iraq comes instantly to their minds.

And so the good admiral and the SecDef come to pay homage to the American soldiers who conquered Mexico. What diplomatic genius.

While they are at it, why not lay a wreath in Hiroshima to the brave American airmen who died over Japan? Or maybe erect a statue to Sherman in Atlanta? What if the Mexican army chief went to New York to commemorate the brave freedom fighters who took down the towers?

No, no, no. Keep the soldiers out of Mexico. To Mexicans, the U.S. military means only one thing: unshirted aggression. The dates 1846-48 might convey something to one American in a hundred. Mexicans know that in those years they lost half their country to what U.S. Grant called an utterly unjustified invasion. They remember.

You don't have to agree with Grant's assessment. Mexican behavior is determined by what they think, not what we think they ought to think.

People remember invasions for a very long time. It is not smart to step on a country's national corns. Even today, a lot of Southerners would march on Washington under arms if they thought they had a chance of winning.

It is not just that Mullen and Gates did what they did but that they had no idea what they were doing. Mexico is not the Dry Tortugas. It is a country of 110 million people sharing a very long border with the United States. What happens here has consequences for

America. It might make sense to treat the place with a modicum of intelligence, to have some grasp of how Latins think. I don't mean a firm grasp or real understanding. I am not an extremist. But maybe just a clue.

From Guadalajara, our policy toward the continent below seems to be determined by bumbling children, by domestic politics, by truculent and heavily armed Boy Scouts. Is Hillary Clinton the secretary of state for her long experience abroad, her command of languages, or because her appointment healed a schism in the Democratic Party? No one in power seems to know that there is anything to know about South America. I suspect I could count on the fingers of an amputee's hand the number of high-ranking U.S. officials who speak Spanish.

In the past it perhaps didn't matter much whether Washington knew anything about Caracas, La Paz, or Brasilia. Latin Americans were all the same—serape, tequila, exaggerated sombrero, sleeping under a cactus, burro waiting. I am still asked by Americans, "In Mexico, do they, you know, have paved roads?"

In today's more complicated world, with the Asian giants rising and seeking raw materials, maybe we should pay more attention. We do not need to arouse resentment when it can be avoided. We do, however, and it brings leftists to power. In the last election here, a truly nutball leftist, AMLO—Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, came within a few chads of being president of Mexico. Hugo Chavez thrives on American hostility. We treat Cuba as an enemy and, sure enough, it acts like one. None of this is in our national interest. ■

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