

Unlikely Cold Warriors:
Hattiesburg's Civic Organizations and Mississippi Southern College's Latin American
Institute

The following was written in on an information sheet sent to the Rotary Club of Hattiesburg in April 1957:

[T]he student in your home today may be tomorrow's president of one of the other American republics. A good case in point is the Japanese student who spent four lonely years on the campus of one of our great universities. He obtained the education for which he came, but few made friends with him. He was left to his own devices in a cold American city. He went home with a degree and a large dose of bitterness toward America. On December 7, 1941 (Pearl Harbor Day) he was Japanese Minister of War.¹

Written only a little more than ten years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, these words struck the hearts of anxious Hattiesburg, Mississippi, civic organization members. As they painfully recalled the events of Pearl Harbor Day, they found themselves in the midst of a new, greater fear of the Cold War in which nuclear weaponry and the complete destruction of states became a reality.² How could the United States prevent another, much more devastating Pearl Harbor in the future? How could the banker in the Rotarian Club, or teacher in Buen Vecino Club at Mississippi Southern College aid his or her country in preventing such an attack? With this somber message, citizens of Hattiesburg readied themselves to ensure that the international students at Mississippi Southern College gained a positive social, cultural, and educational experience in the United States. Thus, these civic organizations, in their interaction with the students at Mississippi Southern College's Latin American Institute, became a crucial "arm" of United States foreign policy during the period of the Cold War.

¹ "El Club Buen Vecino" info sheet, April 1957, Rotary Club District 6840 Records, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg (hereafter cited as Rotary Records).

² See H. Bradford Westerfield, *The Instruments of America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1963). 180-185.

Founded in 1947 by Colonel M. Nydegger, the Latin American Institute (now English Language Institute) at the Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississippi) was a direct result of the aforementioned contemporary United States foreign policy with Latin America. Not only was it established to alleviate the English language struggles of the growing number of Latin American students at the College,³ but in the spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 Good Neighbor policy it also tied the American republics together as "good partners in exclusiveness."⁴ For the Latin American students, English classes were supplemented by special classes on the United States' culture and customs. A few years later, interested students from the United States were able to take courses in the Spanish language and inter-American affairs to increase an understanding and appreciation between the American republics.⁵ Thus, the Latin American Institute functioned as a "two-way street in language and inter-American understanding."⁶

The excellent reputation of the Institute's unique programs quickly spread throughout Latin America by the late 1950's.⁷ As founder Melvin Nydegger boasted in 1950, students were attracted from "the very best families in South America"⁸ and were potential "persons of great importance in their Latin communities,"⁹ who later became businessmen or politicians, just to name a few. One example was Latin American

³ "The Two-Way Street to Better Understanding," reprint from *Latin American Report* (June 1958), Rotary Records.

⁴ William Reitzel, Morton A. Kaplan, and Constance G. Coblenz, *United States Foreign Policy: 1945-1955* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1956), 76.

⁵ "The Two-Way Street to Better Understanding," Rotary Records.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*; "El Club Buen Vecino" info sheet, Rotary Records; Rotarian District Committee memo to Rotarian Club President and Secretaries – District 684, 16 February 1959, Rotary Records.

⁸ Melvin G. Nydegger to R.C. Cook, 15 November 1950, Cook Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg (hereafter cited as Cook Papers).

⁹ "The Two-Way Street to Better Understanding," Rotary Records; see also "El Club Buen Vecino" info sheet, Rotary Records; "International Good Will Is Spoken Here," *Hattiesburg (Miss.) American*, 13 June 1987, Mississippi Vertical File (English Language Institute), McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg (hereafter cited as ELI Vertical File).

Institute student H. Machado from Managua, Nicaragua, who returned to his country and wrote to the Latin American Institute about his prospects of becoming an economic advisor to the Board of Directors of the Banco Nacional de Nicaragua.¹⁰ The Latin American Institute (and the United States as a whole) hoped these influential Latin Americans would return to their home countries – and high-powered professions – with a positive view of America and its customs. As a result, a healthy inter-American partnership would follow suit. Mr. Machado, for example, would return to Nicaragua with a much greater appreciation of the United States. The United States hoped, then, that Mr. Machado’s experiences abroad would positively influence Nicaragua’s economic practices toward the United States (and, henceforth, negatively toward the Communist world).

The Institute, however, could not alone accomplish the task at hand. The students and faculty of Mississippi Southern College, as well as members of the Hattiesburg community were enlisted to complement the work of the Institute and to promote to the students a positive image of values and culture in the United States. Enter El Club Buen Vecino. Aptly called in English the “Good Neighbor Club,” Buen Vecino was established by Marian Reindorp (wife of Institute director Dr Reginald Reindorp). The club’s purpose was two-fold, as it endeavored to carry out the tenets of [Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy. By including all interested civic organizations in the Hattiesburg community (men’s and women’s clubs, service organizations, etc.),¹¹ El Club Buen Vecino was a well-organized machine which operated to expose the Latin American students to as many positive facets of American life as possible, hopefully forming valuable friendships. It was the belief of the members of El Club Buen Vecino that

¹⁰ H. Machado to Mrs. Nydegger, 16 August 1966, Nydegger Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg (hereafter cited as Nydegger Papers).

¹¹ “The Two-Way Street to Better Understanding,” Rotary Records.

individual friendships were the basis for international alliances. As a 1959 Buen Vecino Club fact sheet stated:

These friendships on a person-to-person basis are the foundation of friendships between nations. A nation is not geography, but people, and peoples consist of individuals. By the same token the attitudes of nations toward each other are determined by the attitudes of the individuals. The Club Buen Vecino provides the channel and the opportunity for each American to establish his quota of friendships and then add his blocks to the building of desirable inter-American and international attitudes, to be an ambassador of good will [. . .].¹²

Under the leadership of Marian Nydegger, the social activities of El Club Buen Vecino took place once or twice per week¹³ and included “teas, dinners, picnics, [and] musical programs.”¹⁴ Furthermore, club members could become involved individually, as it was emphasized in the 1959 Buen Vecino Club fact sheet:

simple invitation to a cup of coffee or on as large a scale as that provided by the tour of the city conducted by the Chamber of Commerce or overnight visits in the homes of Rotarians, professional colleagues, or private individuals and families¹⁵

could promote friendly inter-American relations.

The Rotary Club of Hattiesburg was one of the members of Buen Vecino Club, and their documents shed further light on the question of foreign students in the United States, and more specifically, those at the Latin American Institute. Rotarians such as Dr. Reginald Reindorp and Dr R. C. Cook were also influential organizers of the Latin American Institute, and therefore saw the need for civic involvement in the lives of these visiting Latin Americans.¹⁶ As fierce champions of democracy and enemies of Communism, the Rotarians saw work with the Latin Americans as a move toward ensuring that the American governments shunned the spread of Communism. A Rotary

¹² “El Club Buen Vecino” info sheet, Rotary Records.

¹³ “The Two-Way Street to Better Understanding,” Rotary Records.

¹⁴ “El Club Buen Vecino” info sheet, Rotary Records.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rotarian District Committee memo to Rotarian Club President and Secretaries – District 684, Rotary Records.

memo urged Rotarians and teachers of English (as a second language) to “dispel communist propaganda about this country.”¹⁷

To better understand local Rotary activities with the Latin American students, it is important to look first at the work of the Rotary’s national work with cultural exchange programs. The Rotary club established a Graduate Fellowship, stating in an undated pamphlet that:

In a world of nations armed with weapons capable of global destruction and seething with old hatreds and new misconceptions, international understanding becomes of paramount importance.¹⁸

Like Dr Nydegger, the Institute’s founder, the Rotarians hoped that through international cultural exchange programs, such as the ones provided by the Latin American Institute, international knowledge and understanding, and hence peace, would be promoted.

The Hattiesburg chapter of the Rotarians was extremely involved in carrying out the national organization’s goals. First, they established a district scholarship in 1959 to support Latin American teachers of English who wanted to study in the United States.

That same year, the district sponsored a teacher from Lima, Peru to study at the Institute,¹⁹ and in later years, involved these teachers in Rotary functions and meetings.²⁰

In their memo which stated the creation of this program, the Hattiesburg Rotarians avowed that “It has been proved that anti-American persons from our neighboring countries to the south rapidly change their points of view when given a chance to see democracy in action.”²¹

Like the other sources, the validity of the above statement is not certain. As this memo is not based on historical events alone, but rather on anti-Communist

¹⁷ Rotarian District Committee memo to Rotarian Club President and Secretaries, Rotary Records.

¹⁸ Rotary Foundation Graduate Fellow Booklet, Cook Papers.

¹⁹ Rotarian District Committee memo to Rotarian Club President and Secretaries, Rotary Records.

²⁰ Warren Tracy, “Spokes,” (bulletin of Hattiesburg Rotary Club, 18 August 1970), Rotary Records.

²¹ Rotarian District Committee memo to Rotarian Club President and Secretaries, Rotary Records.

indoctrination for the most part, it cannot be accepted as historical fact. However, as with many of the other sources analyzed above, it is this bias that actually adds to the source's value. The bias aids the historian in understanding the political and social mindset of the time, and how these values were used to interact with the international student community.

The Hattiesburg Rotarians also used Spanish-language periodicals and pamphlets to spread their ideas to the Latin American students. The Rotarians' Spanish-language magazine, *Revista Rotaria* was donated to the Latin American Institute in 1958 on behalf of the Hattiesburg Rotarians as a gesture of "good will" to "make [the] international guests feel just a little bit more at home."²² Furthermore, the Rotarians appealed to the sense of Pan-Americanism and deep religious beliefs of the students. As one of the pamphlets given to the Latin American students offered:

Señor, soy un niño de América, rubio o moreno, que habla inglés o portugués o español, pero hijo de esta tierra Americana donde el sol es tan generoso [. . .] Esta oración que nace del corazón de un niño Americano, que puede ser chileno o mexicano, o argentino o venezolano, o guatemalteco o brasileño.²³

This simple prayer defines itself as one born in the heart of the American child – whether from the United States, Chile, or Mexico, or speaks English, Portuguese, or Spanish. Clearly through this children's prayer, the Rotarians aimed to create a feeling of unity among Americans of all backgrounds, languages, and cultures – whether they were from North, Central, or South America. With the idea that Americans were all created as one, then, *all* Americans could band together against a Communist threat.

²² Joseph Earnest (Secretary of Hattiesburg Rotarians) to Reginald Reindorp, 15 September 1958, Rotary Records; Clyde B. Kelly (circulation manager of *Revista Rotaria*) to Joseph M. Earnest (Hattiesburg Rotary Secretary), 10 September 1958, Rotary Records.

²³ Translation: "Lord, I am a child of America, light or dark-skinned, who speaks English or Portuguese or Spanish, but is a child of this American land where the sun is so generous [. . .] This prayer is born from the heart of an American child, who can be Chilean or Mexican, or Argentine or Venezuelan, or Guatemalan or Brazilian.; Rotary Club de Maracaibo, "Oracion del Niño Americano," 1958, Rotary Records.

After reading this prayer and other similar documents, perhaps many Latin Americans believed that it was neither the United States nor their home governments – but a much higher power – who called them to band together to defend their America.

Yet from these documents alone the international students’ reactions can only be assumed. Did these students react positively to the works of these involved organizations? Did the organizations’ activities actually aid in the United States government’s desire to curb Communist activity in Latin America?

According to the Hattiesburg *American*, the answer to these questions is yes. In a 1987 article entitled “International Good Will Is Spoken Here,” the *American* asserts:

There is no way to accurately assess the impact the thousands who have passed through the ELI [English Language Institute] may have had or will have on our economy or on in our relations with other countries. In several instances there has been clear-cut evidence that top policy decisions favoring the U.S. have directly resulted from these leaders’ association with the ELI. In others, the influence may be more subtle.²⁴

This article offers seemingly strong evidence for the positive effects of the Latin American Institute (presently the ELI), referring to “several instances” of favorable international decisions toward the United States as a result of the Institute. Though this may very well be true (and probably is), this source would have been more valid historically if it had given examples of some of these key decisions. Furthermore, this article was written in 1987, well after the fears of the Cold War had subsided in the United States. However, it offers a good starting point for determining the scope of influence the legacy of the Latin American Institute had on international affairs.

More questions are answered by turning to the students themselves. By using correspondence from the students to the teachers of the Latin American Institute (mainly to Marian Nydegger), one might ascertain opinions students had of their time in the

²⁴ “International Good Will Is Spoken Here,” *Hattiesburg American*, ELI Vertical File.

United States. As early as 1951 at least, students were writing Nydegger, thanking her for helping them during their stay in the United States – recalling old memories and missing friends.²⁵ One Honduran student even commented to Mrs. Nydegger that her mother and father “like you as much as I do and they are grateful for everything you’ve done for me.”²⁶ So, in pleasing one Latin American student, the Latin American Institute pleased her entire family as well. A Peruvian student commented that his seven years at the Language Institute were “some of the most wonderful years of my existence,” and that he considered Nydegger “as a second mother.”²⁷

As the Latin American Institute continued to instruct the masses in English and in the American way of life, it broadened its scope to include students from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Though these students were not Latin American, their experiences at the Institute and perceptions as “outsiders” were quite similar to those of the United States’ “neighbors to the south.” In a letter of 1966, one Japanese student, Nobukazu Honda, actually refers to Marian Nydegger as “My mama Nydegger and declares that “[he] shall never forget all the kindness extended to [the students], and also the Latin America Institute at U.S.M. [. . .].”²⁸ As a result of their experiences in the United States, many students exhibited deep desires to return to the United States. One Japanese student expressed an interest in returning to study at the University of Southern Mississippi,²⁹ and another, to share the many wonderful experiences he had in the United States with his students in Japan. As he writes to Marian Nydegger, Japanese student Takeshi Aori reveals:

²⁵ See Argemiro Alba to Mrs. Nydegger, 7 June 1951, Nydegger Papers; Unknown to Mrs. Nydegger, 26 April 1951, Nydegger Papers.

²⁶ Azueena ? to Mrs. Nydegger, 8 June 1951, Nydegger Papers.

²⁷ Luis ? (“Alcoholes y Melazas del Peru, S.A.” letterhead) to Mrs. Nydegger, 26 August 1966, Nydegger Papers.

²⁸ Honda Nobukazu to Mrs. Nydegger, 21 August, 15 September 1966, Nydegger Papers.

²⁹ Honda Nobukazu to Mrs. Nydegger, 15 September 1966, Nydegger Papers.

I am now planning to realize to [return to the United States] again with my several students, who are all university students, the main reason I have such a plan is that I had a lot of wonderful and valuable experiences in America, in every city we visited. I want to sha[r]e these wonderful things to as many people as possible.³⁰

As a result of Mr. Aori's positive experiences (many created as a result of the work of community organizations) at the Latin American Institute, he decided to share his joys and love of the United States with his own students in Japan. Hence, as was the case with many students of the Latin American students, one's positive perceptions of the United States were shared with many back home. Each positive (and negative) experience in the United States was magnified, then, with the return of the students to their home countries.

Certain limitations arise with the use of correspondence as a source. Though they are extremely valuable for exposing individual opinions, letters do not function well in determining the opinion of the entire Latin American Institute student body. By studying correspondence alone, it is also difficult to determine the impact of these organizations upon the containment of Communism in the Americas, though newspapers may be used to understand it on general terms. According to the 28 February 1960 issue of the *New York Times*, for example, the United States' Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on American Republics' Affairs determined that "The threat of communism in Latin America, while always present, is described as being 'generally of small dimensions.'" ³¹ Furthermore, it estimated that in that year, there were only "210,000 to 230,000 active Communists in Latin America, compared with 600,000 in 1947." ³² However, the exactness of these figures is unknown (who was counted as being "communist?"), and it

³⁰ Aori Takeshi to Mrs. Nydegger, 12 September 1966, Nydegger Papers.

³¹ "Latin Red Threat Is Termed Small," *New York Times*, 28 February 1960.

³² *Ibid.*

is also unknown to what extent cultural exchanges and the work of organizations affected this drop.

When all of the sources are analyzed together, however, the work of the Institute and of Hattiesburg civic organizations may have been effective against the spread of Communism. However it is certain that they were valuable spreading good will of the United States abroad. Because of their promotion of North American ideals and the Pan American spirit, these organizations appealed to the influential Latin Americans at the Institute, and later on, their kindness and appreciation of other cultures welcomed and included students from Europe and Asia as well. When these students, whether as a banker in Nicaragua or a teacher in Japan, returned to their homes, they took this new-found appreciation and understanding of the United States and spread it throughout their homes and communities, thereby accomplishing this special diplomatic mission of the United States and its Latin American Institute.

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