

WILL ROGERS: GOOD NEIGHBOR

*I. E. Cadenhead, Jr.**

In his column of January 23, 1934, Will Rogers expressed his admiration for Secretary of State Cordell Hull and commented, "If this administration never did another thing, the new deal toward all our neighbors to the South has gained many friends for us. . . ." ¹ Will added, however, that we should "Give the Phillipines their freedom, and take that godfather-clause out of our Cuban treaty and first thing you know we would be called 'Brother' and not 'Big Brother'."

While it is true that Will's objections to American intervention in Latin America were a logical part of the isolationism he expressed during his public career, there was something more involved than just the desire to keep the United States at home. Will was sincerely interested in the welfare of the peoples to the South and he was not at all certain that American policy was directed toward the welfare of someone other than ourselves. He demonstrated his own concern most dramatically in August, 1931, when he made a flying trip to Managua, Nicaragua, to cheer up the victims of a major earthquake and to call attention to the need for aid for that nation. ² As an entertainer, author of a daily and weekly newspaper article, speaker, and often-quoted public figure, Will Rogers had many opportunities to express his interest in and concern for Latin America. A special sore spot with Will was American interference in Mexico, Cuba and Central America although he would surely have expanded this had the occasion demanded. ³

At times Will's remarks were intended strictly for humorous effect as was the case in his early days with the Ziegfeld Follies. During the time that the famous revolutionary and bandit, Pancho Villa, was being chased in northern Mexico by American troops Will told an audience at the Follies. "I see where they have captured Villa. Yes, they got him in the morning Editions and the Afternoon ones let him get away."⁴ The presence of President Woodrow Wilson in the audience made this remark especially timely and the President's good-natured

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¹ Will's daily and Sunday articles appeared in a number of newspapers throughout the country distributed by the McNaught Syndicate. Unless otherwise indicated those used in this article were taken from the *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

² August 9, 1931.

³ Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers* (New York, 1941), 287.

⁴ Donald Day, ed., *The Autobiography of Will Rogers* (Boston, 1949), 42.

reception of it reinforced Will's belief that really important people had no objections to his ribbings. Since Will frequently used his better remarks over again, it is not surprising to find him explaining a few years later in his column that "Villa was really the reason for William Randolph Hearst having an afternoon as well as a morning paper in each of the large cities. His morning editions used to always capture Villa every day, so he had to take on an afternoon paper to let him escape again in, so the morning one could get him again the next day."⁵

More often, though, Will's attitude toward Latin America was summed up in the remark he made after attending some of the meetings of the Pan American Conference in Havana, Cuba, in 1928, "It sho' takes quite a Sense of Humor for these Latin American people to understand us shaking hands with one hand and shooting at 'em with the other."⁶

Will's interest in Latin America began very early in his life. At the age of twenty-two, Will and a close friend, Dick Paris, left the Rogers' ranch in Oklahoma on the first of what would become many trips abroad for the lariat-spinning humorist. After a long, and seemingly endless, voyage by way of New Orleans and London, the seasick cowboy arrived in Argentina in May, 1902.⁷ Though the land and cattle business of this South American country were not what Will had expected, he worked his way through a part of the country before finally heading for South Africa and the beginning of his theatrical career with a wild west show.⁸ This brief acquaintance with Argentina was enough to implant in Will a regard for the abilities and sensibilities of Latin Americans. While the Oklahoma cowboy's earliest remarks on Argentina had to do with the gauchos' surprising ability with the bolo, he was later to touch on far more serious matters affecting that nation. There were very few occasions when Will singled out Argentina as a mistreated neighbor but he did urge that American trade with Argentina be increased and that tariff barriers to such trade be removed during the 1920's.⁹ On another occasion he expressed the same sentiment, but in a more telling and humorous fashion. He wrote, "Argentina exports wheat, meat, and gigolos, and the United States puts a tariff on the wrong two."¹⁰

During a large part of Will's career the United States was involved directly or indirectly in the affairs of Nicaragua and this offered another opportunity for humorous attacks upon American policy. Will not only expressed cynicism concerning

⁵ August 5, 1923.

⁶ January 16, 1928.

⁷ December 9, 1928.

⁸ Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers*, pp. 64-66.

⁹ December 9, 1928.

¹⁰ *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Iowa, August 17, 1935.

the official justification for American troops being present in Nicaragua but doubt as to the result of military action. He said in 1927, "War in Nicaragua is holding out pretty good. Our original statement 'that it was only a few Rebels that were dissatisfied' has kinder been disproved. The Rebels must have had a majority when they started out or else we couldnt have killed as many as we have."¹¹ Will continued to criticize our presence there and when it was announced that our troops would stay in Nicaragua until after a presidential election was held, Will remarked, "We are the only NATION on Earth that ever began supervising anything a full *YEAR* before it was due to come off."¹²

Mexico was the Latin American nation that Will came to know best. Even before he visited the nation across the Rio Grande Will was aroused by the attitude of many Americans toward Mexico. As he expressed it, "Mexico has got her problems and we are most of 'Em."¹³ In the summer of 1925 Will used Mexico as an example of what he felt was unnecessary and undesirable "dollar diplomacy". Will pointed out that "America has a great habit of always talking about protecting American interests in some foreign Country. *PROTECT 'EM HERE AT HOME!* There is more American Interests right here than anywhere. If an American goes to Mexico and his Horse dies, we send them a Note wanting American Interests preserved and the horse paid for." Will felt further that since we did not guarantee investments at home, we had no reason to make Mexico guarantee them. For that matter Will felt that there was no particular need for American investment in Mexico. He said, "Our Papers are always harping on US developing Mexico. Suppose Mexico don't want developing. Maybe they want it kept as it was years ago."¹⁴

These feelings that the cowboy humorist expressed concerning Mexico were reinforced in December, 1927, when he visited Mexico as the guest of Ambassador Dwight Morrow. Will left no doubt that he was much impressed by the worth of Ambassador Morrow, and it is easy to suppose that his opinions regarding Mexico in some ways reflected views he heard the Ambassador express. Morrow was not his only source of information, however, because during his stay in Mexico "Don Guillermo Rodriguez" met many of the leading figures of the country and learned much from them. Will came into close contact with President Plutarco Elias Calles on board a presidential train touring northern Mexico, and this experience plus other observations caused Will to praise Calles highly. "Calles,"

¹¹ November 20, 1927.

¹² March 9, 1928. See also January 5, 1928.

¹³ November 6, 1927.

¹⁴ June 28, 1925.

Will was later to say, "is the strongest and most dominating character in either North or South America."¹⁵

Former president Alvaro Obregon also made a hit with his American visitor. Though Calles, a president, received most of the accolades, Will paid Obregon the supreme compliment of the humorist when he praised the Mexican's sense of humor. "He's the fellow that the Sculptress wanted to make a bust of after he had lost him arm," Will wrote, "and he said 'No, they were liable to take him for Venus De Milo'."¹⁶ Will also credited Obregon with the following remark on the unsuccessful assassination attempt that had led to a lengthy and expensive period of hospitalization: "I can't afford to be missed again; it's lots cheaper to get hit!"¹⁷

Though willing to see Mexico's side of most questions Will was not blind to the existence of problems. While assuring the American public that Calles and Obregon were not bandits, he admitted that religion was still a problem in Mexico. Both Mexican leaders, Will said, would like to settle the church strike then going on, but so far had been unable to. With a presidential election approaching in the United States, Will injected the thought that Al Smith as a Catholic could help in settling the church problem in Mexico.¹⁸ The ever-present problem of militarism in Mexico did not escape the humorist's attention either, and he made use of this frailty in Mexican politics in another of his articles. When politely chastised for being late for dinner while traveling aboard the presidential train, Will replied, "Well, I just want to tell the President that I'm sorry. I was up in the front cars with some of the Soldiers. I have only been in Mexico one week, but you tell him I've learned that It's better to stand in with the Army of Mexico than the President." Calles was very graciously given the last word though and was reported by Will to have replied, "You tell Mr. Rogers that that was very smart of him to find that out, but that I found it out years before he did—that's why I am President."¹⁹

Several months after his trip to Mexico Will reported a summary of his observations in the *The Saturday Evening Post* in a series of articles entitled "More Letters From a Self-Made Diplomat," a continuation of an earlier series addressed to President Calvin Coolidge based on a trip to Europe. By this time Will had had a chance to get his thoughts better organized

¹⁵ December 20, 1931.

¹⁶ Will Rogers, "More Letters From a Self-Made Diplomat," *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1928. Acknowledgement is made to the Curtis Publishing Company for permission to quote from this series.

¹⁷ July 19, 1928.

¹⁸ January 15, 1928.

¹⁹ *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1928.

and also, without the space limitations of his daily article, to spell out in more detail his opinions. He was still impressed with the apparent change in our dealings with Mexico under Morrow's direction because, as he put it, "Up to now our calling card to Mexico or Central America had been a gunboat or a bunch of violets delivered by the Marines. We could never understand why Mexico wasnt just crazy about us; for we had always had their good-will, and oil and coffee and minerals, at heart." Not only had Mexico objected to this attitude by the United States but,—it was added:

They got impudent and passed laws about what they could do with their own lands and their own Natural Resources, and here they wasnt asking us anything about 'em. Well, that was a fine come-off! What right did they have to pass a law telling us what we was to do with their resources in their country? An the funny part was the Rascals got away with it!

These actions in Mexico, Will observed, had led a lot of Americans to want to go in and take the country over. "Where did this Country down here, with no great chains of Commercial Clubs and Chambers of Commerce and Junior and Sophomore and Freshman Chambers of Commerce, and Rotarys and Kiwanis and Lions and Tigers Clubs and no golf pants, and no advertizing Radio programs—where did a nation like that come in to have Oil anyhow?" This was the way Will had the interventionists thinking. Someone, though, had been responsible for wiser action, Will now knew, though he was not quite ready to give President Coolidge credit for the change. Still he felt that he had to report a great improvement in relations between the two countries.²⁰

Will's interest in Mexico continued as the months passed and he still had the ability to find just as much that needed correcting at home as abroad. When Calles announced that he was stepping down from the leadership of Mexico, Will wrote, "Now wouldnt it be great if Mexico was to start electing her Presidents by the Ballot instead of by Bullet! And us try electing a few by Ballot instead of by Bullion!"²¹

There was still much to be hoped for with regard to Inter-American relations from Will's point of view. He attended the Pan-American Conference in January, 1928, and commented, "What a beautiful sight as the Texas steamed into this flag and crowd draped city on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. It made you proud and showed what a friend we could be to the world if we would only let them all alone and let them run their various countries the way they think best."²² His apprehensions concerning the future were pretty well summed up the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, May 12, 1928.

²¹ September 3, 1928.

²² January 16, 1928.

following day when he reported President Coolidge's speech to the conference. "He didn't say that we would do anything for these countries, but, on the other hand, he didn't say that we would do anything against them. So it was what you might call a conservative speech."²³

The advent of the Hull-Roosevelt "Good Neighbor policy" was a big step in the right direction to one of Will's isolationist train of thought in the early 1930's. He happily reported on May 31, 1934, that President Roosevelt was giving Cuba a new treaty with the "godfather" clause being taken out. The same day he was able to report that the Interior Department was taking over the job of "wet nursing Porto Rica" from the army, while the Phillipines were "rehearsing for peace." Will commented that it would not be long "till our army will all be visiting America at one time." "That's the dope," he said, "get em all home, add to their number, add to their training, then just sit tight with a geat feeling of security, and just read about foreign wars that's the best thing in the world to do with them."

Will's isolationism was to be put to a severe test in the months just preceding his death in August, 1935, but, like most Americans, he was far more concerned with events developing in Asia and Europe than he was with the fate of a good neighbor policy. Whether his mid-western brand of isolationism or his instinctive humanitarianism would have prevailed in the years that followed must remain a subject for pure conjecture.

²³ January 17, 1928.