

America: an ongoing discovery

*Juan Pellicer**

Who said America has been discovered?
Alfonso Reyes

Rather upset by a certain lack of respect shown by the Bolivian government to Her Majesty's ambassador, stately, plump Queen Victoria crossed Bolivia off the big map at Buckingham Palace with a piece of chalk and majestically declared to her Prime Minister: Bolivia does not exist.

Only a couple of years after the discovery, both the Spanish and the Portuguese crowns asked Pope Alexander VI to play the role of supreme arbiter in their conflict over the ownership of America. Doubtless, inspired by Solomon, His Holiness drew a vertical line with another piece of chalk on the big map at the Vatican: the land on the left side of the line —the West— was then formally the property of the Spanish crown, the land on the other side —the East— the property of the Portuguese. Thus, America was divided and blessed.

When confronted by this piece of news, a Central American Indian chief laughed and said that the Pope must have been quite drunk when he made such a decision because nobody in his right mind disposes of something that does not belong to him.

With the Quincentennial, every American country set up a special committee to deal with all aspects of the celebration: What should we celebrate? Our own discovery? The birth of colonialism in America? The meeting of two different worlds? The utopian possibility of the creation of a better and happier society? An invasion, a defeat, a foundation or an invention? There has also been a proliferation of books, essays, articles, research, lectures and seminars on the

discovery and development of America.

The fact that we, in Europe as well as in America, all call it a discovery since we learn it that way at school may well be another expression of ever-prevailing Eurocentrism, the vision of the world from the European point of view. Even time and space have been defined from the point of view of Europe as the center of the world.

Very often, Europeans forget that the American continent began to be populated by its real discoverers fifty thousand years ago. It seems that since Europe was not duly informed, this fact could not be regarded as discovery.

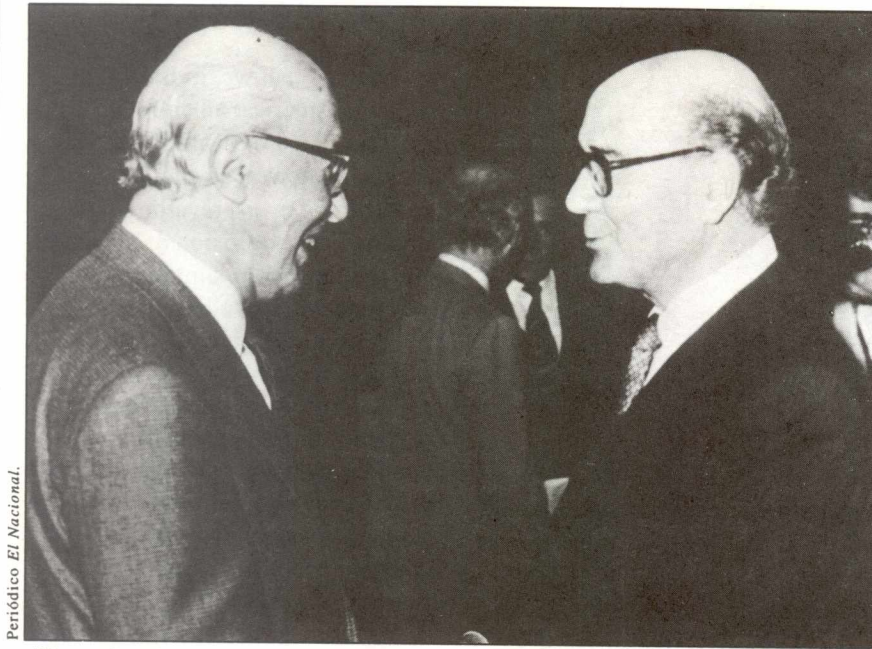
As when the existence of Bolivia depended on the royal mood of a not always very jolly British sovereign and the appropriation of America on the infallible judgement of a not always very holy Pope, relations between America and Europe have somehow always been marked by rather rigid roles: Europe as discoverer, America as discovered. It might be called the discovery complex.

Apparently, nothing is quite as satisfying to Europe as to discover



Arthur A. Henrikson (USA).

* Ambassador of Mexico.



Periódico El Nacional.

Alfonso García Robles (left) with our Editorial Director Hugo B. Margáin.

something, and to complete the symmetry, nothing delights America more than to be discovered. America is measured by European standards. Of course, if Americans do not get good marks they feel hurt. If they do, they feel blessed, their prestige is then intact.

Europe measures America by European standards. If Americans refuse to be measured, Europe feels hurt. If she is allowed to be the standard, she feels fulfilled and her prestige certified. This may be fate and, however childish and simplistic it sounds, it seems to be true.

Closely observed, the five-hundred-year history of American-European relations may be defined as a permanent discovery or, as our title suggests, an ongoing discovery. In America, Europe has not only been discovering a different natural environment but also a different reality. Gold, silver and opportunities for remunerative employment are not all that create wealth and turn dreams into reality; so also do different ways of expressing the world.

The recent discovery of Latin American literature is a case in point. Specialists have of course always been

aware of its importance but the public at large seldom has. The so-called "Latin American boom" of the sixties promoted a number of living literary figures whose texts reached numerous European readers.

This stimulated interest in the literary roots of those authors and the European public began to "discover" our literary figures of the past. Many people in Europe have "discovered" America by reading our fiction and poetry.

But not only the "boom" and its far-reaching marketing promotions have contributed to this "discovery". Nobel prizes—undoubtedly the most prestigious awards in the world—have played a key role in this respect since 1945, when a Chilean, Gabriela Mistral, became the first Latin American writer to receive one; in 1967 it was awarded to a Guatemalan, Miguel Angel Asturias; in 1971, to another Chilean, Pablo Neruda; in 1982 to Colombian Gabriel García Márquez; and in 1990 to a Mexican, Octavio Paz. The Nobel committee may well be regarded as an efficient European agency in the ongoing quest for the discovery.

It was mainly through the Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 1982 to the Mexican internationalist Alfonso García Robles, that Europeans chanced to discover another significant aspect of America. I refer to the most important American peace initiative ever put forth: the total prohibition of nuclear weapons in Latin America as stated in the Treaty of Tlaltelolco. García Robles has been acknowledged the architect of the Treaty that transformed Latin America into the first nuclear weapon-free zone to cover densely inhabited territories.¹

Under the political circumstances currently re-shaping the map of Europe, literally every day, through accommodation, unification and even declarations of the non-existence of whole nations—*mutatis mutandis* Queen Victoria's old formula—I would not hesitate to single out Latin American military denuclearization as the most relevant feature of peace, disarmament and security, yet to be fully discovered by Europe. By fully discovered, I mean not only studied but regarded as a source of inspiration for new developments in the fields of national, regional and continental security policy currently being reassessed and changed in Europe.

However, the circumstances are different. Our military denuclearization is typically and characteristically American. I would not hesitate to say that it may be regarded as a 100% American product. It is part of our historical context and traditions.

It is indeed how Latin American nations preserve their security as opposed to the US's historical implementation of its national security

¹ Apart from Latin America, only Antarctica, Outer Space, the Sea Bed and the South Pacific (Treaty of Rarotonga) have similar prohibitions, based on four different treaties concluded in 1959, 1967, 1971 and 1985, respectively.

policy. In this sense, the Treaty may be regarded not only as a Latin American product but as fully American, since the US is also part of its reason for being.

During the fall of 1962, the world was brought to the brink of nuclear catastrophe. Deeply shocked by high altitude photographic evidence, the US

Why only Cuba? Grave concern then grew throughout Latin America over the possibility that the superpowers might easily turn our territory into a nuclear battlefield, as was about to happen during the Cuban missile crisis, or at least into a nuclear arsenal with all the obvious dangers involved.

A joint declaration was issued soon afterwards. Ambassador García Robles became its chief negotiator. In the following autumn, a UN General Assembly resolution welcomed the initiative and encouraged its implementation, which was approved without a single dissenting vote.

When President López Mateos launched that historic initiative, he must have pondered not only on the recent missile crisis but the overall development of US-Latin American relations, continental security and particularly the possibility of turning Latin America into a superpower battlefield.

Indeed, US national security policy has traditionally been inspired by the possibility of extracontinental threats to the hemisphere. When the US was only a regional power—throughout the 19th century—the threat was represented by European centers of colonial power. When the United States became a global power and particularly after the Second World War, the threat was posed by Soviet expansionism. It was during the long period of the cold war that practically all popular—social, political and economic—struggles in

“Many people in Europe have discovered America by reading our fiction and poetry”

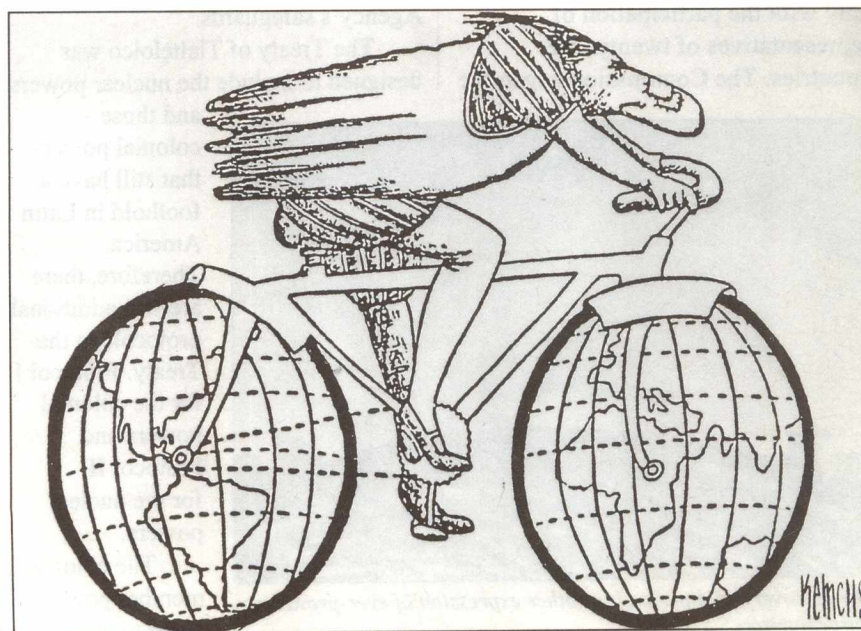
government demanded that Cuba and the Soviet Union immediately remove Soviet nuclear missiles deployed on the island after the attempted US invasion of Cuba.

The US navy blockaded the island while a number of Soviet naval vessels, possibly carrying more nuclear weapons, sailed toward Cuba determined to follow their course all the way. Under the tremendous pressure of this contest of wills between the two superpowers, the UN Security Council met at once. Negotiations began.

While the Soviet ships continued approaching the island, one hundred and eighty US navy units blocked the way to Cuba, one hundred thousand US troops prepared for action, more than one thousand military planes were stationed in nearby Florida and two marine battalions were alerted at Guantánamo (the military base the US still has in Cuba).

Fortunately, the superpowers finally reached an agreement: the Soviet Union would immediately remove the nuclear weapons if the US would commit itself to refraining from further attempts to invade Cuba, as long as Cuba did not represent a threat to US security. I assume this meant, as long as Cuba was in fact a nuclear weapon-free zone.

Only a few months later, at the beginning of spring 1963, Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos wrote to his counterparts in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. He proposed the earliest possible joint declaration of their governments' will to sign a multilateral agreement with the other Latin American states forbidding the manufacture, deployment, storage and testing of nuclear weapons and devices to launch them, anywhere in Latin America.



Arturo Kemchs Dávila "Kemchs" (Mexico).

Latin America were interpreted by US and many other administrations as East-West conflicts.

Fear of communism created a very distorted perspective in the US's interpretation of Latin American events and maintained constant tension in the region. Most regrettably, US administrations have never been able to understand that motivation for socialist policies in the area has actually been due more to the inability of prevailing socioeconomic systems to meet the elementary needs of the vast majority of the population and their tendency to concentrate wealth in the hands of the few, rather than to Soviet expansionist strategies.

Therefore, alarmed by the possibility of a nuclear superpower confrontation on the Latin American stage, the UN General Assembly fully supported the Latin American governments' decision to cancel that possibility for good.

García Robles' consultations and negotiations led first to a Latin American conference to design the structure needed to draft the text of the treaty.

The Preparatory Commission for the Denuclearization of Latin America was then set up in Mexico City with the participation of representatives of twenty-one countries. The Commission began the

painstaking task, led by García Robles himself.

As soon as the treaty was ready for signature it was subscribed by fourteen of the commission's twenty-one members on February 14, 1967, at the Mexican Department of Foreign Affairs located in the old Aztec district of Tlalotelco. Today, twenty-five years later, a total of twenty-seven nations have signed it.

According to the Treaty, its members agree to total prohibition of nuclear weapons. Total prohibition, as stated in the text, refers to testing, manufacture, production, acquisition or use, by any means, as well as the reception, storage, installation, deployment and any form of possession of any nuclear weapons by Latin American countries. Peaceful uses of nuclear energy, however, are not at all limited by the Treaty.

To this end, the agreement set up a mechanism to verify and prevent that such energy be in fact developed for the testing or manufacture of weapons. Nations are under the obligation to deliver specific, periodic reports about this, as well as to allow inspection under certain circumstances. The system calls for the full application of the International Atomic Energy Agency's safeguards.

The Treaty of Tlalotelco was designed to include the nuclear powers

and those colonial powers that still have a foothold in Latin America. Therefore, there are two additional protocols to the Treaty. Protocol I for the colonial powers and Protocol II for the nuclear powers.

The colonial member powers agree to apply the

statute of military denuclearization defined in the Treaty in the Latin American territories ruled by them. This protocol has been signed by all of them (France, Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States).

Protocol II has been signed by the five nuclear powers that, as parties to the Treaty, have assumed the obligation to respect the statute of military denuclearization in Latin America and have agreed not to contribute in any way to the commission of acts violating the Treaty, nor to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the parties to the Treaty.

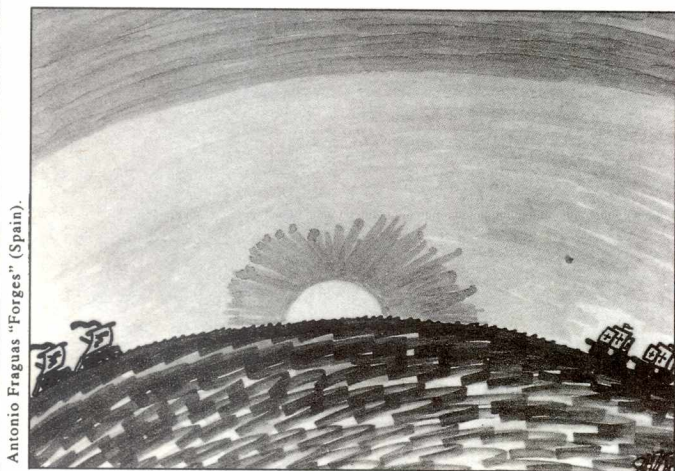
This stands as an invaluable precedent in future disarmament developments of this kind in other areas of the world. If the nuclear powers are already no less than grantors of a military nuclear statute in a certain part of the world—as in Latin America—nothing should prevent them, in principle, from doing the same in other regions.

After the signing of the Treaty of Tlalotelco, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was signed in London, by Moscow and Washington on July 1, 1968. García Robles also played a central role in the negotiations and drafting of this document.

Today, one hundred and forty-one countries are parties to the Treaty.² It prohibits any kind of trade in nuclear weapons, as well as the assistance, encouragement or inducement of any non-nuclear military power to manufacture or acquire such weapons.

During the fourth session (Geneva, August 20-September 14, 1990) devoted to reviewing how nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states had observed their Treaty obligations during the five preceding years, the Latin American initiative must again have been a

² SIPRI yearbook 1991. Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 668.



Antonio Fraguas "Forges" (Spain).

The discovery of America is another expression of ever-prevailing Eurocentrism.

