

**TREATY WITH COLOMBIA,
"THE STORY OF PANAMA":
SPEECH IN THE SENATE OF
THE UNITED STATES**

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Treaty with Colombia, "The story of Panama": speech in the Senate of the United States by Charles S. Thomas

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CHARLES S. THOMAS

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"THE STORY OF PANAMA":
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TREATY WITH COLOMBIA
"THE STORY OF PANAMA"

SPEECH
OF
HON. CHARLES S. THOMAS
OF COLORADO
IN THE
SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JANUARY 3, 1921



WASHINGTON
1921

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SPEECH
OF
HON. CHARLES S. THOMAS.

TREATY WITH COLOMBIA.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, shortly after I became a Member of this body a treaty which had been negotiated by the administration of President Taft with the Republic of Colombia was laid before the Senate. That circumstance provoked considerable interest, both in the Senate and in the country, in consequence of which I deemed it my duty to investigate the circumstances which led up to and culminated in the formation and recognition of the new Republic of Panama. During my investigation that treaty was withdrawn, and consequently we did not pass upon it.

A subsequent treaty negotiated with the same Government by President Wilson was then sent to the Senate in place of the one which had been withdrawn. Pending the consideration of that treaty I prepared some observations upon the subject and gave notice that I would present them to the consideration of the Senate. Before doing so I was requested to postpone the delivery of the address for reasons which seemed to me at the time convincing. A second notice was followed by the same result, although I then reluctantly consented to the request. Since the death of former President Roosevelt I have regretted that I consented to the postponement, because I would have much preferred to have submitted my remarks to the Senate during his lifetime. It will be recalled, however, that in the campaign of 1912 Mr. Roosevelt, as a candidate for the Presidency, became the victim of a would-be assassin, whereupon one of his competitors, Gov. Woodrow Wilson, announced that, owing to that unfortunate occurrence, he would not during Mr. Roosevelt's disability discuss any questions or propositions directly affecting or concerning him. To that announcement Mr. Roosevelt responded in these words:

Whatever could with truth and propriety have been said against me and my cause before I was shot can with equal truth and propriety be said against me now, and it should be so said; and the things that can not be said now are merely the things that ought not to have been said before. This is not a contest about any man; it is a contest concerning principles.

With the sentiment thus so well and so clearly expressed, I am in the heartiest accord, and I feel therefore at liberty to read to the Senate what I have prepared without change either in substance or in expression. I might add, Mr. President, that I have had reason to expect that this treaty before now would have been laid before the Senate for its consideration, and it was because of that expectation that I determined

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to speak. The expected in this instance has not happened, and owing to the brevity of the present session it may not occur. Nevertheless, the result of my efforts perhaps should be laid before the Senate since those who in the future are to pass upon this very important subject may be thus relieved of the burden of much preparation that might otherwise be required.

No argument is needed to support the assertion that a sincere and cordial friendship between the United States and the Latin Republics to the south of us should have been established long ago. Nor is evidence needed to demonstrate that no such sentiment marks their opinion of our purposes, our policies, our institutions, or their intercourse with us. Our warm expressions of regard for them have not been reassuring; and our self-assumed guaranty of their political integrity has frequently challenged their avowed distrust. They measure both by the standards which we have erected along the pathway of our national history, and estimate with some degree of accuracy our precepts by our example. They have observed that with the exception of Alaska, the Gadsden purchase, and the purchase of the Virgin Islands, our extensions of territory in America since the announcement of the Monroe doctrine in 1823 have been wrested from Mexico, from Spain, and from Colombia; that in 1898, while carefully assuring the world that we waged war against Spain for Cuban independence, we did not hesitate to absorb her remaining territories. They have been disturbed by our military occupation of San Domingo, of Nicaragua, and of Haiti, by the eagerness of our citizens for concessions in Central and South America, and by our acquisition of the Philippines, in violation of a fundamental postulate of the Monroe doctrine. These progressive instances of territorial expansion have tended to confirm their suspicion that our magnanimous guardianship might mask a plan of aggression; that our lively apprehension of their foreign colonization might be a pretext, concealing our own designs for territorial expansion. Hence our attitude, whose sincerity has more than once been demonstrated by our actions, has inspired them with no sense either of appreciation or of security; while some of the nations against whose political designs we have safeguarded them, have largely monopolized their markets and occasionally influenced their national policies.

Some years ago the senior Senator from Massachusetts expressed a belief that we were being looked upon with a mixture of dread and ill will in South America. This impression shortly afterwards received striking confirmation in the address of Dr. Freos, the president of the Museo Social of Buenos Aires, at the banquet in honor of Col. Roosevelt upon the occasion of his visit to that city. Dr. Freos cordially but honestly outlined the real sentiment of South America in words evidently selected with careful deliberation. He said:

There is a dominating fact in all South America. It is a manifest and undeniable fact, and it would be a great error to my mind to attempt to silence or even to disguise it. This fact, gentlemen, is that there exists a deep sentiment of apprehension which disturbs Spanish America and inspires it with precautions, causing it to withdraw itself instinctively, and to its own hurt, from the grand center of civilizing light and power established in the north of the continent. The establishment of United States interests in Spanish America is feared, because it is feared that they may incite and cause intervention, which

no people can accept with good will. Such a fear holds it back from more open and friendly relationship with the great nation on the north.

Col. Roosevelt, the nations of Latin America will not feel at their ease so long as they do not rest in the security that no master may arise from them, either from within or without, and that no one, no matter where he may come from, may place in danger their integrity or their independence and sovereignty.

The evident inspiration for this historic utterance upon such an occasion was the Roosevelt Latin-American policy, as exemplified by the episode of the Panama Canal. Before that event one element of warmth pervaded the unkindly atmosphere of South American opinion. It was quickened by the fact that throughout our history we had scrupulously observed our treaty obligations. The written word of the Nation had been its bond. No tarnish rested upon it. Administrations came and went, party succeeded party in governmental control, the fires of Civil War flamed to the skies, and battling sections jostled each other like colliding planets, but the Nation's honor suffered no reproach. Under the shelter of such an influence distrust could not permanently endure. The prospects of an ultimate rapprochement between the United States and the nations of Central and South America at the beginning of the year 1903 were not unpromising. Through the agency of the International Bureau of American Republics, precursor of the Pan American Union, we are establishing closer relations of confidence and esteem. A real sentiment of continental Americanism was within the range of early possibilities. An era of good feeling was taking definite outline and Pan Americanism seemed to be slowly rising above the level of the southern horizon.

These conditions were rudely interrupted in the autumn of 1903 by a vaudeville insurrection in Panama, swiftly followed by its secession from Colombia, its official recognition by the American Government, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the new political entity, and the negotiation of a canal treaty with the junta assuming to represent it, by which the United States, in consideration of the sum of \$10,000,000 in gold, acquired the Panama Canal Zone in perpetuity. This action of our Government, ostensibly based upon the rejection by Colombia of a convention designed to accomplish the same purpose, seemed to disregard not only the most obvious principles of international law but our solemn treaty obligations assumed in 1846, and scrupulously observed for 57 years, by whose terms the United States had in consideration of most valuable concessions solemnly guaranteed to Colombia the perpetual sovereignty of the Isthmus.

Latin America held its breath in amazement; the flagrancy of our conduct taxed their credulity and our own. Then followed a revelation of the humiliating details. America had not only recognized and extended her protection to a State in rebellion against the central Government; she had encouraged, if indeed she had not fostered, the insurrection. She had forcibly prevented Colombia from landing troops upon her own soil for the vindication of her own sovereignty. Her prompt and repeated protests were disregarded. She was branded by the President as a blackmailer among the nations, whose infamous conduct in rejecting a treaty justified both the revolt of one of her constituent commonwealths, and his prompt recognition of it. She

invoked our treaty obligations and confronted the extraordinary assurance that our action toward Panama was in conformity with them. Too weak to resent the affront, she appealed to our sense of justice. She beseeched us to arbitrate her claims for restitution, but her remonstrances and her appeals have been alike unheeded.

This affront was not to Colombia alone. She was the victim. Her territory was invaded by a friendly nation and partitioned over her protest. She alone demanded reparation, but every Government south of the Rio Grande was aroused in just resentment. As we had violated the sovereignty of Colombia, so might we outrage theirs when our interests or our policies required it. As we had rewarded rebellion and created republics in Colombia, so might we also spread sedition among their peoples with like result. As we had thrust aside our treaty obligations with her, so might we treat theirs as scraps of paper. As we had ignored our oft-repeated recognitions of international comity and torn a weak but friendly Republic apart, so might they encounter the same fate when the Colossus of the North should will it. To them our tributes to freedom and our ostentatious regard for the rights of small nations and weak peoples sounded like the essence of national hypocrisy.

Mr. President, this great Republic is the last and best citadel of democracy. It has waged war with the mightiest military power the world ever knew that the institutions and the blessings of popular government may not perish. It needs the support and welcomes the friendship of every nation, especially those of the Western Hemisphere. The power whose unspeakable misconduct compelled the United States to draw the sword has deliberately and repeatedly affronted the principal Republics of South America. They feared Germany as we did not. They had long been selected by her for political domination, and she would have overrun them had the Allies failed to overcome her. These countries know this better perhaps than we do. Many of them severed diplomatic relations with Germany, but, with the exception of Brazil and Cuba—the former peopled and ruled by a population descended from the Portuguese—and one or two Central American countries, they did not declare war against her. We do not fully know why, but we can well conjecture. They hated Germany, but they were not sure of America. They had no love for autocracy, but they distrusted a great democracy whose practices did not always square with its principles. The devil was to them no more attractive than the deep sea, and between these alternatives they did little in the world's great conflict. I fear their attitude will not change until we do justice to Colombia.

Pan-Germanism, a far more sinister foe to the Allies than the legions of the Kaiser, may no longer inoculate the southern continent with its deadly poison. But the removal of this evil does not mean the establishment of confidence and respect for America. The suspicions of the Latin survive and may be fed fat by the German protagonist, defeated but not wholly disarmed, partly with the facts of history, partly with the fictions of his own creation; and it may well be that if the process be not interrupted some of our neighbors may give substantial commercial succor to the defeated Teuton lest we may wax too great and powerful for their welfare.

Especially in Colombia might such results develop. She has not forgotten, and until her grievance is heard and adjusted she can not forgive our wanton assault upon her sovereignty. She has crystallized the outrage down to its most trivial incident upon the tablets of her memory. She has written the facts into her curriculums. The children in her schools are taught the story of Panama, which they treasure in their memory. Natural resentment toward America and desire for ultimate justice are part of the national consciousness. The one blot on our escutcheon is the wrong we did to Colombia in 1903.

Mr. President, if we have wronged Colombia, we should make due reparation. If we have done her no injustice, the world, and especially Latin America, should know it as speedily as it can be imparted through the processes of governmental procedure or by a court of arbitration. And we need the friendship of the entire hemisphere, whose estrangement we can neutralize by redressing the wrong, if wrong there be.

I have been so impressed by the conditions thus imperfectly outlined that I have given them a patient and, I trust, an impartial consideration. I have reviewed the facts regarding Panama as disclosed by official hearings, documents, and reports. I have reread contemporaneous and subsequent articles written by men of high position, and presumably familiar with the subject, assailing and upholding America's part in the formative processes of the Republic of Panama; and I am compelled to affirm that our conduct in that unfortunate affair is without justification and therefore indefensible. The only comfort one gathers from the shameful and sordid story is that it finds no precedent in our history. I trust that we may soon acknowledge our fault and make some reparation, lest it again be some time as it has been invoked to shelter or justify assault upon the integrity of some weak and helpless nation.

The speedy performance of this insistent duty, not alone because of its justice to Colombia and to ourselves as well but because of its immediate and permanent benefit to our political and commercial future, now of all times most desirable, must be my excuse for a rapid review of the principal facts revealed by the "Story of Panama"—one of the most interesting and valuable documents ever given to the public. In doing this I should at the outset remind the Senate that the most important lesson taught us by the Spanish War, and particularly by the voyage of the *Oregon* from San Francisco to Cuba, was the imperious necessity of a shorter route between the oceans, to secure which a canal across Nicaragua or the Isthmus should be constructed and owned by the Government. Preliminary but exhaustive investigations theretofore made had demonstrated the superiority of the Nicaragua route, to which both the great political parties unequivocally committed themselves in their platforms of 1896.

Fifty years earlier, and immediately following our acquisition of California, access to which was then possible around the Horn, our Government negotiated a treaty with New Granada to be "religiously observed" while in force. It was made on our initiative in 1846. By the terms of article 35 we secured free transit of goods and passengers across the Isthmus, together with freedom of all Granadan ports on both its coasts. This immensely valuable concession was guaranteed to