OF ALL THE United States presidents in the twentieth century, none has received as much attention as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His charismatic leadership and interaction with such epochal figures as Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Benito Mussolini have produced a tremendous quantity of literature. William Shirer, reporter turned historian, has written extensively on the rise and fall of the Third Reich and the Third Republic in France. Popular author John Toland has carefully detailed the military expansionism and ultimate collapse of the Rising Sun and has examined the German dictator’s life. Herbert Feis, economic adviser to the State Department during the 1930s and early 1940s, retired to write a series of books on the confrontations in Europe and Asia.

In comparison with the treatment given these titanic struggles, Latin America has virtually been ignored. As a result, the concentration on the movement leading to and the participation during World War II has distorted the motivation of the United States, and needs correction. For the Roosevelt administration’s efforts in Latin America were intimately connected to international events elsewhere.

This hemispheric neglect is somewhat startling. Relatively few scholars have written on the varied aspects of Roosevelt’s Latin American emphasis. Some have gone so far as to claim that earlier administrations had conceived the Democratic policies, but this assertion is not substantiated by the record. A few connections did apply, but this is valid for almost any cause and effect relationship. Roosevelt’s hemispheric diplomacy was a set of actions and reactions to unique circumstances. Accidentally labeled the “Good Neighbor” at the start of his first term, this simplistic phrase, in reality, covered the complex totality of inter-American efforts from 1933 to 1945. The terminology provided a convenient umbrella under which to lump various proposals. The Good Neighbor did not have a precise definition in the public mind, but this was inconsequential. It had enormous popular appeal and recognition. The rhetoric created a positive atmosphere, and Roosevelt constantly alluded to that spirit in order to accelerate momentum at home as well as in Latin America.

When Good Neighbor diplomacy is separated into its components, sophisticated policies emerge. The United States ended many of its interventionist
practices in the Caribbean because their presence became a burden to American taxpayers and a convenient and legitimate target for critics. The government initiated economic measures during the depression that gradually merged, during wartime, into the first concerted foreign aid programs. Cultural and military contacts became major diplomatic considerations, and multilateral cooperation under the heading of the inter-American system received attention unheard of in earlier times.

The writers who relegate Latin American affairs to a secondary place—or completely ignore them—and devote their focus to the deepening European and Far Eastern crises have misconstrued Roosevelt's intentions. He knew that a skeptical Congress and public limited his diplomatic flexibility in regard to the Axis, while they concurrently accepted greater Latin American involvement. He accepted this political reality and used it in his crusade against Germany. He incorporated this regional base to influence other areas, and took advantage of support for inter-American defense and fear of Nazi hemispheric penetration to delineate a security zone and announce an explicit no-transfer statement.

The Good Neighbor was more than innovative projects and challenges from abroad; the driving ambitions of men to achieve their own personal goals were inseparable. The integral relationship between the president, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles was essential to the conduct of foreign affairs. The trio's association was a combination of respect and distrust, and when the latter triumphed in the summer of 1943, it helped destroy a decade's work. In the next two years the Good Neighbor began cracking, and victory over the enemy marked the end of the diplomatic triumvirate that enacted Latin American policy: Welles left first, in disgrace, followed by Hull's resignation because of poor health, and shortly afterward, Roosevelt died.

These human factors plus the critical nature of the Good Neighbor in world events graphically portrayed its vitality in Roosevelt's presidency. The steps taken in hemispheric matters also established models for postwar economic, military, and cultural legislation. These activities have not been systematically explored, and as a consequence the international picture painted during the Democratic rule is incomplete and needs significant revision.