

The British Empire vs. The Pan-American RR

by Anton Chaitkin

The accompanying map was drafted by U.S. Army engineers for the Intercontinental Railway Commission and was presented to President William McKinley in 1898. The projected railway, uniting the Western Hemisphere, was not built, due to the murder of McKinley, and the accession to power of British imperial ally Theodore Roosevelt.

The subsequent lock on U.S. strategic policies by the London-Wall Street axis nullified the Lincoln legacy of anti-imperial cooperation with Latin America, until Franklin Roosevelt restored it with his Good Neighbor Policy beginning in 1933. But Depression conditions and World War II prevented the revival of the hemispheric railway project before the death of FDR again threw the U.S. off the track.

U.S. passion for modern development south of the border began with President Abraham Lincoln's struggle for the Union against the British-sponsored Confederacy, a struggle in which he was allied with Mexico's fight against the 1862 British-French imperial invasion. Lincoln restored relations with Peru, that his predecessor James Buchanan had severed, and began sending people qualified to aid Peru's growing ambitions to integrate South America with rail lines and steel mills.

In the 1870s, American engineer Henry Meiggs built heroic Peruvian railroads into the Andes mountains, aiming at a future breakthrough across the continent. The British Empire reacted with fury, supplying the money and naval power for a proxy attack on Peru by Chile, known as the War of the Pacific (1879-1883).

In 1881, U.S. President James Garfield and his Secretary of State, James G. Blaine—the last great American economic nationalist leader—aided Peruvian resistance against the British-Chilean assault. President Garfield was soon murdered and Blaine was fired, leaving the British free rein to destroy and plunder Peru.

President Benjamin Harrison re-appointed Blaine Secretary of State in 1889, and Blaine immediately pulled together the Pan American Conference: Representatives of the U.S. and Central and South American republics met in Washington to discuss a customs union and other measures to develop modern conditions, and to unite the Americas against British imperial designs.

Connecting the Great American Cities

On May 12, 1890, Blaine submitted to the President and Congress the plan agreed on by the Conference, for a "survey for a railway line to connect the great commercial cities of the American hemisphere."

Blaine reported that "the railways of Mexico have been extended southward, as well as northward, and toward the two oceans. The development of the Argentine system has been equally rapid. Lines of track now reach from Buenos Aires to the northern cities ... and nearly to the Bolivian boundary. Chile has a profitable system of railroads from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and the completion of the tunnel that is now being pierced through the Cordilleras will bring Valparaiso within two days' travel of Buenos Aires [Chile had temporarily shaken off British control and was working with Blaine.] In the other republics similar enterprise has been shown. Each has its local lines of railway, and to connect them all and furnish the people of the Southern Continent the means of convenient and comfortable intercourse with their neighbors north of the Isthmus [of Panama] is an undertaking worthy of encouragement and co-operation of this Government."

A Commission was formed to do the survey and plan the great project. The chairman was Alexander Cassatt, a Pennsylvania railroad executive who was part of Philadelphia's nationalist economics leadership grouping around Lincoln's advisor, Henry C. Carey (1793-1879).

U.S. Army engineers and other military and civilian personnel, aided by Latin American experts and governmental authorities, mapped out 5,456 miles of new rail lines that were to connect with thousands of miles already in operation in North and South America.

Blaine died in 1892, and the completed proposal—an eight-volume report with 123 illustrations and 311 maps and profiles—was presented to President McKinley, Blaine's pro-nationalist protégé. McKinley was discussing this and other plans for hemispheric cooperation at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, when he, like Lincoln and Garfield before him, was shot to death.

Ascending to office by the bullet, Theodore Roosevelt cast the project aside. Seeking to demonstrate that the United States was allied with Britain as its overlord, he broke off negotiations with Colombia for the cooperative construction of a Panama Canal, and staged a phony revolution to break off the Panama state from Colombia.

To the present day, no railroad, nor even any automobile road passes between North and South America.

The present proposal, for a Columbia-Venezuela cooperative railway project, places back on the table the initiative for inter-hemispheric connection and progress that was born in the American republics' mid-19th-Century fight for survival.

