



THE LIFE OF  
NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER  
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WORLDS TO CONQUER  
1908-1958

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A squat, mustachioed, pipe-puffing figure, Pasvolsky carried about him an air of supreme intellectual authority. "The brain that walked like a man," was one derisive description of him. Said his aide Joseph E. Johnson, "He reminded me of the third little pig in Disney's version of that fairy tale—the one whose house could not be blown down." Yet he was also a pragmatist and a canny political fighter. Recruited by Hull to advise on trade issues, he soon became a confidant of the flinty secretary; when Hull began looking ahead to the structure of the postwar world, it was to Pasvolsky that he instinctively turned for ideas and counsel.

Though Hull was now gone, Pasvolsky remained to carry on their quest for a world organization. He had been the intellectual wellspring behind Dumbarton Oaks, and ever since had been intensively involved in plans for the great conference at which the world body would at last be organized.

But first, he had to attend to Mexico City. He had barely countenanced the idea of an inter-American conclave. As far as Pasvolsky was concerned, it was at best a distracting sideshow, and at worst a potential threat to all his grander designs. Unable to head the meeting off, he was determined to limit the damage. As his train clattered through the Great Plains, Pasvolsky sat wreathed in pipe smoke in his private car, mulling the dangers that lay ahead.

Stettinius, meanwhile, was winging his way to the Mexico meeting from Yalta. En route, he stopped in Rio de Janeiro for a preconference tête-à-tête with President Vargas. Despite his suspicions of Argentina, Vargas expressed the hope that it might somehow be permitted to attend the meeting. But Stettinius waved away this notion as "off beam . . . we do not wish to stoop to that position at this time." The United States, he told Vargas, already had much evidence "relative to sabotage, to smuggling, to clandestine radical activity." In view of that, he felt there was no point in being too hasty about welcoming Argentina back into the inter-American fold.

The delegation sent by the United States to Mexico City was one of the largest entourages ever dispatched to an international conference. Besides the two official delegates (Stettinius and Rockefeller) there were thirty-three "advisers," six "special assistants to the delegates," and twenty-two "technical officers." In all, after counting in translators, press officers, stenographers, and clerical help, the American mission totaled 107: at least three times the size of any other nation's retinue.

This imposing assemblage was partly a reflection of Rockefeller's grandiose aspirations for the conference. But it was equally a manifestation of the assistant secretary's shrewd political calculus. He had persuaded both Tom Connally, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Warren Austin, the committee's most influential Republican, to attend the conference; two prominent members of the House's Foreign Affairs Committee were

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The inter-American conference was a Nelson Rockefeller production, and he imbued it with his hyperkinetic style even before the opening gavel. For the trip down to Mexico City, he chartered (at his own expense) a plushly outfitted DC-3, and invited a formidable throng of Latin American ambassadors to join him. Also accompanying Rockefeller was a phalanx of aides: Avra Warren and John Lockwood and Frank Jamieson and Wally Harrison, among others. And, to attend to Rockefeller's more corporeal needs, Dr. Kenneth Riland of New York, an osteopath who had been a house physician at U.S. Steel, where he ministered to Ed Stettinius' aching back. Hearing of the wonders of a Riland massage, Rockefeller began using him as well. Henceforth, he would not attempt any business trip of consequence without Riland in attendance to relieve his muscular—and sometimes psychological—tension. Riland was a good listener as well as a good masseur.

At the same time that the Rockefeller party was heading south, another group from the State Department was en route in a somewhat more leisurely fashion, via railroad. They took the train because their leader, Leo Pasvolsky, absolutely refused to fly. And they had long since learned it was best not to question anything Leo Pasvolsky wanted.

The fifty-two-year-old Pasvolsky served as special assistant to the secretary, in charge of postwar planning. His principal task, and his passion, was the forging of the global peacekeeping union to be known as the United Nations. To that task he brought considerable academic skills: before entering government in the late 1930s he had been a longtime fellow at the Brookings Institution and the author of numerous works on international relations. And he also brought the worldliness of the émigré: he had escaped czarist Russia as a youth and become a U.S. citizen in 1911, at age eighteen.

also invited. Thus, Rockefeller assured the conference of a sympathetic hearing in Congress. The U.S. military was equally well represented: among the brass in attendance were General Stanley D. Embick of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Rear Admiral Harold C. Train of the Navy.

The ranks of the "advisers" also included an odd potpourri of American business and labor officials, including Rockefeller's old friend George Meany of the American Federation of Labor. Rounding out the delegation were, as well, top officials from every U.S. government agency that might have some conceivable interest in Latin America. Commerce, Treasury, Leo Crowley's Foreign Economic Administration—all were more than amply represented. No one, but no one, would have any cause to complain to Nelson Rockefeller that they were left out.

Awaiting the arrival of Stettinius' plane on February 20, most of the American horde whiled away the hours playing poker and indulging in the soothing ministrations of Dr. Riland. Rockefeller, however, had no time for such diversions. There were too many pieces to be put into play.

One of these was furthering his relationship with James Reston, the enterprising young correspondent of *The New York Times*. Reston's beat was the postwar order, and he already had infuriated Stettinius by printing top-secret details of the Dumbarton Oaks talks. Despite this, the press-savvy Rockefeller recognized that Reston's could well be the authoritative word on the success of the conference, and so he hastened to fill him in on the directions in which the conclave was likely to go. The result was a scene-setting article on February 19 that reflected, in unattributed fashion, Rockefeller's current approach to Argentina: "Those who are responsible for steering the conference would like to keep the Argentine discussion on as broad a base as possible and if they have their way it is likely that all the cross-currents and discussion of this issue will end with a broad declaration favoring the return of democratic principles to Argentina and the appointment of a committee to watch developments there." It was the same line Rockefeller had privately been taking for weeks: Argentina should be downplayed as much as possible.

On the evening of the nineteenth, Rockefeller—accompanied by Avra Warren and several other aides—went to dinner at the American embassy. Among George Messersmith's other guests were two top Mexican officials, Manuel Tello and Campos Ortiz. After dinner the question of Dumbarton Oaks was brought up. The United States wanted the conference to formally endorse the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, but many Latin nations—still miffed at not being consulted in the first place—were not inclined to do so. What would happen, wondered one of the guests, if the conference issued a report critical of Dumbarton Oaks? Would the United States try to block it?

Those questions had been preying on Leo Pasvolovsky's mind for weeks, and

they partly explained why he had such trepidation about the inter-American parley. To have this conference—a conference the United States actively promoted—issue complaints about Dumbarton Oaks would amount to a direct repudiation of the agreements the United States had struck with the other great powers, agreements that were the very linchpins of the planned international organization. The intricate mechanism of a new world order, the mechanism fashioned piece by piece at Dumbarton Oaks and at Yalta, could well fall apart. To avoid this calamity, Pasvolovsky was willing to allow individual Latin ministers to vent their spleens—as long as the conference as a whole did not issue a critical report.

But Leo Pasvolovsky was not at this dinner; Nelson Rockefeller was. And Nelson Rockefeller had other ideas. He flatly told his fellow dinner guests that State had considered the matter, and would indeed permit the conference to promulgate a critical report, along with resolutions suggesting modifications of the Dumbarton Oaks accord. The United States, he said, would then transmit the whole package to its wartime partners. Rockefeller was unequivocal on the matter: this, he said, was the *decided* policy of the United States.

The guests left the embassy impressed with this turnabout in the American position, and none were more impressed than the Mexicans. Mexico had many problems with the Dumbarton Oaks plan, but had been reluctant to disrupt the conference by raising them. Now the Assistant Secretary of State was practically *encouraging* the Mexicans to make Dumbarton Oaks an issue. In so doing, he was plainly trying to mollify his aggrieved Latin American friends—even at the cost of compromising the position of his own government, the government for which he worked, with the other major powers. It was, for a newly minted Assistant Secretary of State, the riskiest of gambits.

At 1:45 the next afternoon the big C-54 transport plane bearing Edward Stettinius and his party at last touched down in the brilliant, arid sunshine of Mexico City. After the obligatory remarks before the cameras and microphones, the group headed for the Hotel Genève, where Stettinius and Rockefeller had accommodations across the hall from one another. The largest hotel in Mexico, the Genève combined an opulent Spanish colonial style with Anglo-Saxon efficiency: it advertised itself as "the ONLY hotel in Mexico under the personal management of Canadians and Americans."

Once settled in, Stettinius summoned Rockefeller, Messersmith, Pasvolovsky, and other top aides to his suite. Distracted until recently by Yalta, the Secretary of State was just getting around to reviewing the composition of the U.S. delegation—and he was utterly astonished by what he saw. All those advisers, and technical officers, and translators: it was just too much, he moaned. But, in the face of Rockefeller's energetic defense of his handpicked entourage, the travel-weary Stettinius yielded.

## THE LIFE OF NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER

Rockefeller, however, was mute when Stettinius stopped at one name on a list: that of their mutual osteopathic friend, Dr. Riland. The secretary promptly told Rockefeller he was "extremely displeased" to note Riland's presence.

Stettinius then asked Rockefeller what was being done about Argentina. Riland, who would serve as conference president, had it all under control, the assistant secretary assured him. The Mexican Foreign Minister will squelch any discussion of Argentina until the end of the meeting, and then defuse the issue by appointing a committee to study the matter. Argentina would not detrack the conference.

he next morning a caravan of official vehicles wended its way up the six-lane boulevard known as the Paseo de la Reforma to the outskirts of the city, finally entering a vast, lush park. Driving past trailing vines and profusions of tropical flowers, the convoy snaked up a high winding road, through groves of ancient *ahuéhuete* trees, some dating to the time of Montezuma. At the top of the hill, past monumental iron gates decorated with bronze martial figures, the vehicles finally reached their destination: the castle of Chapultepec, site of the Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace.

Chapultepec (Aztec for Grasshopper Hill) was the site of Montezuma II's summer palace. The castle, begun in 1783 by the Spanish viceroy, went through a succession of reconstructions and incarnations as the country passed from ruler to ruler. A getaway for the viceroy, it served as a fortress under Santa Anna and was the scene of the climactic battle of the Mexican-American War in 1847.

The castle attained its apogee of grandeur under the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian, who—with the eager collaboration of his Empress Carlota—re-built it as a semi-tropical Versailles. The walls of the salons were covered with Gobelin tapestries, the bedchambers and anterooms were studded with Louis XV furnishings. The country's later revolutionary governments grafted their own symbols onto the grandiose setting: at the bottom of the castle's grand staircase a fresco was executed depicting Mexico's great revolutionists. The palace served as the Mexican presidential residence until the 1930s, when the sumptuous surroundings proved too much for the ardently egalitarian Cárdenas.

And so the castle stood, a monument to both colonial excess and passionate nationalism, a relic in which the baroque, heroic, and lachrymose strains in the national character freely intermingled. As the conference delegates' cars slowed to a halt, they passed tiled fountains and pergolas bright with flowers, as well as a memorial sculpture of a weeping woman: "Mexico Mourning Her Slain Sons." Once inside the cool of the palace, the delegates entered a reception room, rich with pink satin brocade, that had once been Carlota's boudoir.

From the first session on Wednesday morning, February 21, it became apparent that this conference would frustrate the best efforts of Nelson Rockefeller, or anyone else, to keep it within bounds.

This session was supposed to be a sedate meeting of the steering committee, made up of the nineteen Foreign Ministers. They would elect the conference president (Padilla), organize committees, and then adjourn to await the formal opening of the conclave that evening at the Mexican Chamber of Deputies. Some of the ministers—including, apparently, Stettinius—thought the session would be private. But when they arrived at the meeting place, the palace's Jewel Room, a narrow rectangular chamber some one hundred fifty feet long and no more than forty feet wide, they were confronted with absolute bedlam. More than 1,000 people, including newsmen, photographers, and assorted hangers-on, were crammed into the room, jostling for position and taking up every conceivable inch of space. An endless din filled the room, and when the loudspeakers failed just minutes after the opening gavel, the ministers found themselves shouting just to be heard by their colleagues at the other end of the table.

The first order of business, Padilla's election, proceeded uneventfully enough. But then the Paraguayan ambassador to Washington, Oelso Velázquez, rose and stunned the assemblage by immediately bringing up the matter of Argentina. It should not be the last item on the agenda, said Velázquez, but the first, and he offered a motion to that effect.

All eyes turned to Padilla. The Mexican pointed out that all the participants had previously agreed to discuss Argentina last. Another delegate from Mexico, Castillo Najera, then stood up and suggested that the Paraguayan motion be referred to the steering committee. The other committee members, however, rejected that maneuver. They voted to stick to the original agenda, with Argentina the concluding item.

Padilla had prevailed, but only for the moment. It was already obvious, to the crowd that packed the room as well as to the ministers, that the Argentina issue could not be shunted off to parliamentary limbo forever.

It became even more obvious that evening, at the ceremonies formally launching the conference.

The lavishly gilded Chamber of Deputies was awash in a cascade of illumination as the beams of floodlights circled the room and flashbulbs erupted. In the tangle of bodies jostling for places in the galleries, a group of Mexican military cadets made their way to the forefront. They were brandishing the Argentine flag.

At the rostrum stood Mexico's President, Manuel Avila Camacho, greeting the delegates with exhortations to collaborate in building a permanent peace and a sound economic future. There were allusions to Dumbarton Oaks, with

assertions by the Mexican President that Latin America had "the right as well as the responsibility" to offer its own proposals.

Then he brought up Argentina. The Argentines had "a cordial place in our thoughts and affection," Avila Camacho said. "Deploring their absence, and hoping that circumstances will soon give us the satisfaction to see them officially associated with the present efforts, I salute the delegations here," he declared. The comments were greeted with an ovation—the only one the president's speech elicited.

Afterward, there was much speculation about the drift of Avila Camacho's remarks. "There is a growing feeling here," said the *Times's* Reston, "that the conference is only at the beginning of its trial with Argentina."

Unable to keep the Argentine matter bottled up any longer, Stettinius and Rockefeller searched for a way out of their Gordian dilemma.

They had in hand reports of some recent meetings various intermediaries had with Perón. One account—relayed to Mexico City by the U.S. embassy in Bogotá, Colombia—described conversations within the previous two weeks between Perón and the Acting Foreign Minister of Colombia, Gustavo Santos. Perón told Santos he was willing to accept anything, without restrictions, in order to become reconciled with the United States and the other American nations—so long as Argentine "decorum" (another of his euphemisms for national pride) was preserved. Any loss of "decorum," he warned, would result in his fellow officers marching in from their barracks and cutting him to pieces. He would rather die at the hands of the "*Señores Americanos*" than suffer such a fate.

The Argentine strongman then specifically asked Colombia to shepherd the efforts toward his country's rehabilitation at the Mexico City meeting. He accompanied this request with dire warnings: that if his reconciliation attempts were not accepted the present government would be replaced by an even more militantly nationalist one, that complete chaos could ensue, that the Communists might step into the vacuum and take control and then use Argentina as a base for expansion throughout South and Central America.

Even if the United States discounted these overtures, they were bound to come to the attention of the other American states and wreak havoc at the conference. There were indications that Colombia might indeed press Argentina's case at the conference; Colombian President Alfonso López unequivocally told the U.S. ambassador that something had to be done about Argentina at Mexico City.

Reviewing their options, Stettinius and Rockefeller decided they could no longer downplay the issue. Instead, they would do what the State Department had never before been prepared to countenance: they would take Juan Perón at his word. If Perón was truly serious about meeting U.S. conditions, they would propose those conditions and put the ball back in his court.

A top-secret cable was prepared for transmission to Roosevelt. In it, Stettinius explained the turnabout this way: "The Argentines seem prepared to desert the Axis and join the good neighbors. They have considerable support in their maneuvering but so far we have been able to hold the line. However, I am convinced that we should take decisive action promptly in order to maintain the initiative. As Argentina meets conditions on which I believe there is a consensus of opinion, we can insure the unity of the Americas. Otherwise, while Mexico City on the surface might appear to be a success to hemispheric unity, yet basically there would be quicksands that would undoubtedly begin to shift before the Conference is over."

The conditions Stettinius and Rockefeller proposed were that Argentina declare war immediately on Germany and Japan; that it join an inter-American committee to combat subversion; that it disperse its troops along the Brazilian and Chilean borders to allay the suspicions of its neighbors; and that Argentina subscribe to all the resolutions of the Mexico City conference. Significantly, there was no longer any insistence on democratic elections or on turning the government over to the Supreme Court; Stettinius was at last willing to accept, as he told FDR, that "Perón is going to remain in the Argentine whether we like it or not."

Once those conditions were agreed to, Argentina would be invited to send representatives to Mexico City, and at the end of the conference each of the American republics would announce that it was resuming normal relations with the country.

Rather than issue those terms publicly, Stettinius and Rockefeller chose to use a more discreet channel. Peru's Foreign Minister, Manuel Gallagher y Canaval, would privately approach the Argentine government with the offer. Nothing would be made public until the Argentine government accepted.

The proposal was relayed to FDR aboard the USS *Quincy*, still en route from Yalta, on February 23, and on February 25 he wired back his okay. Gallagher went ahead with the plan.

Despite the attention the press was giving his role—*Time* described the conference as "the test of Nelson Rockefeller's long and earnest efforts to win Latin American friendship"—Rockefeller endeavored, uncharacteristically, to remain in the shadows. He chaired no committees, made no speeches, gave no on-the-record interviews. He may well have been the meeting's most influential player, but, at least in the early days, he left no footprints in his wake.

In the afternoon of February 23, Stettinius gave his first Chapultepec press conference. He reviewed some innocuous proposals the United States would be making, deflected questions about Argentina, and introduced his principal aides.

"I know we should not adjourn," Stettinius said, "without asking Mr. Rockefeller to say something to you."

Rockefeller approached the microphone. "Pleasure to be here," he said, and walked away.

In his backroom machinations, Rockefeller received help from a familiar source: the FBI.

The bureau by now was well established in Mexico City; it even had operatives planted in the city's telephone department. Each morning FBI agents reported to Rockefeller and Warren on the doings in the rest of the diplomatic community. And at the outset of the conference, the agents sent Rockefeller a warning: his hotel suite was bugged. The bureau could install a device that would vibrate and break up the recordings, but it couldn't do it right away, so Rockefeller had best be careful.

The FBI well knew the impact this disclosure would have on Rockefeller: since 1943 agents had been checking his home and office phones for wiretaps once a month, at Rockefeller's request. It was not clear just what led Rockefeller to believe his phones might be tapped. Most likely, his fears were simply a by-product of his own conspiratorial bent and taste for the covert; like others caught up in the intelligence subculture, he was somewhat paranoid about becoming a victim of it himself. When he moved over to State it was suggested that the FBI checks be discontinued, on the grounds that no other assistant secretary received such a service. Rockefeller, however, was adamant, and the monthly phone checks continued.

Duly warned in Mexico City, Rockefeller proceeded to exercise appropriate wariness, even going so far as to watch what he said in restaurants, because the FBI also advised him that some of the tables were wired. When Latin diplomats visited his suite, he took them out on the terrace—and, sotto voce, explained to them why. His whispered cautions were a sublime display of diplomatic one-upmanship, sure to discombobulate the most seasoned envoy, and Rockefeller loved to watch the flabbergasted expressions on his guests' faces when he confided the warnings from his friends at the FBI. As he would later recall, "This was the kind of G-man stuff that everybody has an interest in. They were impressed that I knew about it, and they were impressed that I told them about it."

Friday, February 23, was "resolutions day," when a deluge of proposals—covering everything from the rights of man to the abolition of censorship—descended upon the conference. But only one resolution truly stood out: Colombia's antiaggression resolution, the proposal that ex-President Santos had vetted with FDR a month earlier.

The Colombian resolution effectively expanded the Monroe Doctrine—which set up a shield against the designs of nonhemisphere powers—to cover inter-American aggression as well. There was little doubt in anyone's mind as to just whom this new doctrine was aimed at.

The press was quick to report U.S. support, and even encouragement, of the resolution. Nevertheless, as the American delegation began to digest the Colombian verbiage, a quiver of foreboding was felt in certain quarters about the potential blank-check commitment of U.S. military power and about what it would all mean for the future world peacekeeping organization. Among those who voiced their concern was Leo Pasvolosky.

Rockefeller, however, was determined to push the resolution through. He had midwived the proposal since his first conversations with Santos: wangling time with FDR and making sure that Roosevelt signed off on the idea. The resolution, in his eyes, would seal the postwar inter-American alliance, engaging the United States in a permanent commitment to the security of the hemisphere. Not only would it alleviate the pervasive fear of Argentina but it would also counter another, less openly discussed apprehension: the fear of Communism.

Worries about Communist inroads had long haunted the Latin American ruling class, and now that the war was ending the specters seemed chillingly close at hand. As Laurence Duggan would note, "The sweep of the Red Army through Poland and East Prussia produced more shivers than admiration among the ruling caste of Latin America. The triumvirate of landowner, priest, and Army officer which had held power in most of the Latin American republics for the past four hundred years trembled in its boots. . . . Soviet victory frightened them as the Nazi conquests never had."

At the heart of the Latin anxiety about Dumbarton Oaks was their nervousness about the Soviet clout in the new world body. Small wonder, then, that the Colombian resolution was so instantly, and gratefully, acclaimed by the delegates: it offered a means to neutralize that clout, at least in the hemisphere. In Duggan's words, "The Latin American oligarchs wanted an inter-American peace system so effective that there would be no need for the proposed world organization to take a hand in the political disputes of this hemisphere."

Rockefeller, well aware of Great Power sensitivities, scrupulously refrained from citing, or even elliptically alluding to, the Communist menace. But then again, there was no need to. He found it sufficient to invoke the dream of hemisphere unity; the delegates, in their own minds, could fill in the rest.

And now that the measure was on the table, there was no way he would allow it to be deflected.

Throughout that weekend—while Stettinius relaxed at a hideaway in the nearby resort town of Cuernavaca—Rockefeller worked tirelessly to move the resolution along, securing the vital endorsement of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Wary of the nebulous world organization, the chiefs were eager to cement regional military alliances, particularly in the hemisphere. General Embick declared himself solidly in favor of the Colombian doctrine.