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THE IMPERIAL
ROCKEFELLER

A BIOGRAPHY OF

NELSON A.
ROCKEFELLER

BY JOSEPH E. PERSICO

PS

thing else amused him. When Nelson Rockefeller dined at 21, nothing so vulgar as a check intruded.

Matters thereafter moved quickly. One Friday in January 1969, Jim Cannon, still a senior editor at *Newsweek*, was invited to fly to Waretown, New York, with Rockefeller. By Monday morning he was a special assistant to the governor of New York at a desk at 55th Street, with an odd assignment for a state official.

Three days after his inauguration as President, Richard Nixon had called Rockefeller and had asked him to undertake a special mission. The President had just talked to Galo Plaza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States, and had asked him the single best move that he could make to develop a successful policy toward Latin America.

"Send Nelson Rockefeller there," answered Galo. "His name is magic."

Rockefeller was cautiously flattered by the unexpected request. He had, in one way or another, served every American President in his day, except for Jack Kennedy. Now his old nemesis was calling on him. But Nixon might have ulterior motives; suspicious staff aides wondered if the President wanted Rockefeller to taste the hospitality that Nixon had known in 1958 as Vice-President, when he had been stoned and spit upon in Latin America.

Though he approached the proposition warily, Nelson Rockefeller was not a man to turn down the President. On that plane ride to Waretown with Jim Cannon, Rockefeller drafted the terms under which he would accept the assignment. The trip must be designated a "presidential mission." He was to be provided with presidential aircraft. He would tolerate no State Department interference. Indeed, Rockefeller was to have total control over who accompanied him and whom he saw in Latin America. He asked Cannon to give him a hand in drafting his letter to Nixon. Then, much to Cannon's surprise, when this task was completed, Rockefeller started to write the reply that the President was to send to him agreeing to Rockefeller's terms. Thus was Cannon introduced to Nelson's operating style.

"Keep it small. Keep it small," the secretary of state warned repeatedly when Rockefeller met with Nixon to discuss the final shape

of the Latin-American mission. Rockefeller was undaunted by Nixon's newly named man at State, William Rogers. His entrée to the White House on foreign policy was his own protégé, Henry Kissinger, now national security director. "If I'm going to do this right, I'm going to need enough expert advisers" was Rockefeller's stubborn counterrefrain to Rogers' cautions. Nixon kept his own counsel. But on one point, he and Rockefeller gleefully agreed as they rivaled each other in defaming the State Department in front of the man whom Nixon had just named to head it. "Mediocre." "Unimaginative." "Spineless." The two old bartlers pounced on a handy common prejudice as they strove mightily to like each other.

Nixon, however, was unprepared for Rockefeller's grand vision of the mission. He had imagined a single airplane touching down at half a dozen major capitals, where Rockefeller would confer privately with key Latin leaders and report back to him. The whole business should take two weeks at most. Rockefeller, however, assigned Jim Cannon to organize an invasion. Experts were recruited from agriculture, education, economics, women's rights, and sixteen other fields. Nelson intended to visit every one of the twenty-three nations between the Rio Grande and Tierra del Fuego.

Cannon, for the first time, experienced the vicarious clout of the Rockefeller name. Mexican Foreign Office bureaucrats emphatically rejected his request that President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz meet Governor Rockefeller on the Sunday on which he was to arrive in Mexico City. The Mexican leader's Sundays, they said, must be kept free. Cannon fretted for a while and then had his secretary place a call directly to the president's office. "Mr. James Cannon calling for Governor Nelson Rockefeller." Díaz Ordaz came on the line. Of course, he would be honored to meet Governor Rockefeller on his arrival.

Nancy Maginnes' crew, out-of-work ballerinas, aspiring actors and budding playwrights, produced thick fact books for each country, studded with crop statistics and industrial output and explaining the nice distinctions between the Partido Radical Conservador and the Partido Conservador Radical. An advance team of seventeen fanned out weeks before the mission to remove every pebble in Rockefeller's path. They worked places like Tegucigalpa, Quito and Managua with a thoroughness suggesting that Nelson Rockefeller was

campaigning for *jefe del estado*. I traveled with the advance team and was given cram courses by U.S. embassy staff on each nation's culture, mores, heroes and history, to enable me to write Rockefeller's arrival speeches. "Bolívar was right when he said, 'If the world chose a capital, it would have to be Panama.'" "In the Nobel Prize awarded in 1967 to Miguel Angel Asturias, the world justly honored Guatemalan letters." "We saw your growing economic might when the two millionth Brazilian-made vehicle rolled off the São Paulo assembly line." We could have gone to the State Department to have the speeches translated, but that was unnecessary. Flor Brennan, the family's own translator at Rockefeller Center, did the job.

Nelson Rockefeller's love for Latin America was genuine and rare among major American political figures. The raw vitality and wild beauty of this world had won him during his early manhood. So much of Latin America was unfinished, rich in resources and people, a continent virtually begging for development. Here Nelson's penchant for practical dreaming, for grand schemes of uplift-via-free-enterprise, could enjoy full sway. And Galo Plaza was right. His name was still magic to the oligarchies, the *latifundistas*, the conservative, U.S.-educated, old-family ruling classes in Latin America. But to the Latin left, his name was anathema.

The presidential mission to Latin America got off to a shaky start. In Guatemala, the CIA warned Rockefeller not to stay overnight in the capital and not to ride around the streets. Nelson and numerous advisers thus were forced to meet their Guatemalan counterparts in a tropical boondock.

In the Dominican Republic, his Secret Service bodyguards told him to keep his windows rolled up during the motorcade through the capital city of Santo Domingo. Local anti-gringos had a habit of lobbing grenades at such tempting targets. "Absolutely not," Rockefeller retorted. "The last thing I'm going to do is hide from the people behind bulletproof glass like dictators I've known down here." He ostentatiously rolled down the window, and Jim Cannon, riding with him, involuntarily shared his bravado. Up front, the Secret Service men's windows remained firmly shut.

In Honduras, the police killed a demonstrator among a mob of anti-American students. Rockefeller was determined to talk directly

to the crowd. The Secret Service tried to hold him back, but he shook off his protectors and moved into the tense throng alone. He debated animatedly in Spanish with the students. Afterward, he remarked, "See. Nobody laid a hand on me. But somebody lifted my wallet."

"In all the years I worked for him, the hardest thing I ever had to do was deliver the word on Venezuela," Jim Cannon later recalled. "We were in Trinidad and the next stop was Caracas. I'd just been informed by the Venezuelan government that they could not guarantee his safety. They were uninviting him. He was having lunch at the time. He looked up at me as though I'd struck him. Then he said, 'After all that country has meant to me. And all I've done for them?' He shook his head. 'This is a terrible blow.'"

The American press maintained a drumfire of criticism about the trip, and Nelson faced rising pressure to break it off. But this combative personality would never cancel the mission. Nelson Rockefeller tended to become more intractable in the face of criticism.

Argentina proved the worst. As the Rockefeller party arrived, seventeen IBEC-owned supermarkets were still smoldering. The fires had been ignited by urban guerrillas who placed incendiary devices in the caps of toothpaste tubes and hair spray and shaving-cream cans on the store shelves. Ten thousand troops stood guard in Buenos Aires. A labor leader was machine-gunned as Rockefeller met with Argentine officials. When Nelson told the Argentines that he intended to meet with opposition and student leaders, they objected vociferously. The Secret Service had also ruled out a meeting he had planned with left-wing students. Rockefeller, however, slipped out a back corridor of his hotel with a handful of aides and spent an hour with six young leftist leaders in a private apartment. They studied him with disbelief, as though unable to accept that the living symbol of all they abhorred was actually with them in a small middle-class living room. He spoke in Spanish, which helped dissolve the tension, as he answered their politely phrased but increasingly probing questions. He and the students parted as philosophically distant as ever, but with friendly handshakes. Outside, this great city of three million lay under a pall. Streets were dark and deserted, and the atmosphere was of a nation on the brink of civil war.

The hostility toward him from the Latin left was not without

foundation. His first service in Latin America years before under President Franklin Roosevelt had been intended to help quarantine the hemisphere from Nazism. Yet, as the Allies triumphed, it became clear that it was not so much totalitarianism that Nelson opposed but regimes or ideologies hostile to the United States. With the war won, he dismissed the claims of some State Department advisers that Latin fascists were regaining influence. The danger, he believed, was not resurgent fascism, but communism, and he had not altered that view in the intervening quarter century.

Innocent of his tolerance of rightist Latin regimes, I was to be badly burned. In Panama, I had been given a quick course in the country's history by Panamanian employees of the U.S. Information Service. They were, at first, uncomfortably deferential, peddling a Pollyannaish vision of harmony between Panama and the Yankee giant with its foot planted across their isthmus. When they came to trust me more, they urged that Governor Rockefeller, in his arrival speech, say something supporting an eventual return to democracy in Panama. Not criticism of the current regime, but just a quiet brief for political freedom. I checked the suggestion with embassy officials who concurred.

Thus, in the draft, I included: "Under the firm pledge of your present government to return to the blessings of democracy, I know that Panama will progress even more swiftly and surely in the future." I cabled the full text to the Governor, in New York.

On the next stop, in Rio de Janeiro, I had dinner with Brazilian friends whom I had known from my tour there as a USA foreign service officer years before. The husband was a businessman, his wife, a high-level, longtime employee of the American embassy. Hardly bomb tossers, they were roughly the equivalent of middle-of-the-road Republicans. They surprised me with their vehement opposition to the dictatorship then ruling Brazil. They cited harrowing cases of friends who had been tortured or jailed without explanation or who had simply disappeared. They too urged me to have Rockefeller, as the American President's representative, say something favoring democracy. And again I included the point in my draft remarks, this time in Nelson's speech for his arrival at Brasilia.

When he saw the Panamanian and Brazilian drafts, he was fu-

rious. "Don't you understand? That's exactly what these people resent, our sticking our noses into their business. Americans trying to tell them how to run their internal affairs." I assumed that he referred to the resentments of those in power rather than those in the political prisons. The passages supporting a return to democracy were removed from the speeches.

During the Panama visit, he was utterly charmed by the young *caudillo* Omar Torrijos. He liked the Panamanian strongman's energy, his up-from-the-people authenticity. Torrijos wanted one thing from the United States at that moment, helicopters, so that he could get around the country more easily. The U.S. State Department had earlier refused, believing that Torrijos would only use them to tighten his grip on the country. Nelson Rockefeller, with a sly grin, disagreed. Panama needed the helicopters for its rural medical programs, he told the State Department people. Omar Torrijos got his helicopters.

"Let me say a word about the gentleman who has been referred to as a tinhorn dictator," he said later. "This is a self-made man, a poor boy who went into the army because that was the only way he could get an education. There is no more sincere person in terms of his own country and his objectives."

In a later stop, at Haiti, our embassy officials pleaded with me to omit any mention of the country's bloody-handed dictator, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, in Rockefeller's speeches. When I told them that I had to include the man's name somewhere in the text, one attaché suggested, "Well, just have Rockefeller say how delighted he is to be here at beautiful Duvalier Airport." In the final text, Papa Doc was mentioned only slightly more prominently. I also mentioned at our initial meeting with the U.S. Embassy staff that the Governor's practice in each country had been to meet with the opposition as well as the government. The ambassador answered, "In Haiti he'll have to do it in the cemetery." What the newspapers and television did feature of the mission's arrival in Haiti was Nelson Rockefeller on a balcony, a wide grin on his face and his arm around that luckless nation's "president for life."

Nelson believed that political norms in North and South America had to be judged by different standards. As he told a reporter: "By

working with the group that is in power, we can do more to encourage the restoration of democratic institutions than we can by having nothing to do with them or openly talking against them." Long afterward, speaking in a closed session with a group of U.S. military wives in Washington, he was more blunt. "A great many of my friends down there say that democracy is really impossible today in those countries because in a democracy you cannot control the organized subversion, guerrilla activity and so forth. . . . So they either go communist or to a military dictatorship."

On September 3, 1969, seven months after the mission had been announced, Nelson Rockefeller presented his Latin-American report to Richard Nixon. Considering the chaotic course of the trip, the product that emerged from it was surprisingly sound. The report represented Nelson's pragmatism at its keenest. He had come away believing that the old pillars of the status quo—the Latin church and the military—were changing, moving along progressive and reformist lines. Since military regimes were apparently congenial in Latin America, he urged that the course of reason was to learn to live with these governments rather than isolate them. He did not spare American businesses whose exploitive behavior stirred Latino antagonisms. He called for more open U.S. markets for the region's products and recommended preferential trade advantages and generous refinancing of Latin America's foreign debt.

Shortly afterward, he told the National Press Club, "To quote the press reaction of last summer, the trip was 'ill-conceived,' 'ill-timed,' 'a personal humiliation' and should have been canceled. But, since my report came out in October, the press has described it, and I quote, as 'deserving high marks,' 'expert counsel,' 'most helpful' and 'a sharp analysis of the situation in the Western Hemisphere.' I therefore congratulate you. Any American institution that could learn that much in just a few months can't be all bad."

Richard Nixon, however, barely raised a finger to implement the Rockefeller recommendations. It was not, Rockefeller ruefully concluded, entirely Nixon's fault. Nelson had never been able to infect his friend Henry Kissinger with his own passion for Latin America, and Henry was now largely shaping the Nixon foreign policy.

It was late in the year, and Nelson's interest was necessarily turn-

ing to 1970 and the need to decide whether he should run for an unprecedented fourth term as governor of New York. He had committed his reputation and \$750,000 of his own money to this effort to create a fresh U.S.-Latin American rapport. The result was stillborn. In the end, the IRS informed him that even his expenses in this cause were not deductible.

Two years later, I witnessed part of the reason for his love of Latin America. My wife and I had planned a vacation on the Caribbean coast of Venezuela, and when the Governor learned of the trip, he suggested, "Why not visit the ranch for a few days?" Why not, indeed.

We spent some days on the beach, then went to the Hotel Tamanao in Caracas to await a man who was to take us to Monte Sacro, Nelson's spread. While at the hotel, we received a call from Bill Coles, who had been described to me as "Nelson's man in Venezuela." Coles was a Dartmouth classmate of Nelson's, swept up early in the Rockefeller wake and deposited in this country to look after Nelson's interests. Coles and his wife had lived most of their lives and had raised their children in Venezuela. He invited us to visit him at his home in an elegant Caracas suburb.

That night he told us how, years before, Nelson had proposed something different for their college class reunion. The whole Dartmouth class of '30 was invited to come down to the ranch, as his guests, of course. A good number of alums made it and had a grand old time. In the meanwhile, their host was caught up in a competing enthusiasm at home. Nelson picked up the tab but missed his own party.

The Rockefeller's had Bill Coleses all over the world, people whose lives had crossed their paths at some point and thereafter never left their orbit. In Brazil, or Hawaii, or Tehran, there was always Nelson's man or Laurance's or David's. I once heard a speech delivered by a man who gave as his professional title "Associate of Laurance Rockefeller." An odd umbilical, I thought.

The day after our visit to Bill Coles, we met Sam Scillitani, who had come up from the ranch to get us. We drove through jagged, verdant mountains into the Venezuelan interior where, three hours