

Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela. By Darlene Rivas. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 290 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN 0-807-82684-7.

Reviewed by Thomas F. O'Brien

In the past few years, the Rockefeller archives have been the source of a growing number of scholarly studies that explore the family's philanthropic activities as well as the peripatetic career of its most public member, Nelson. Darlene Rivas's *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela* is the latest contribution to this impressive body of literature. Rivas's work complements Elizabeth A. Cobbs's *Rich Neighbor Policy: Rockefeller and Kaiser in Brazil*. Rivas sets two major goals for her work: shedding light on the complex interactions among business, philanthropies, and the state in shaping U.S.–Latin American relations; and challenging depictions of Nelson Rockefeller as an “avaricious capitalist” and advocate of a U.S. policy that sought power and profit at the expense of Latin Americans (p. 4). Ultimately the book is more successful at achieving its first goal than its second.

The first two chapters of *Missionary Capitalist* cover familiar ground, sketching out Nelson's early years, the influence of his family on his philanthropic views, and his activities in the Roosevelt administration as the coordinator of inter-American affairs. In particular, these chapters stress Rockefeller's concern that both U.S. businessmen and diplomats had demonstrated acute cultural insensitivity toward their Latin American hosts, denigrated their abilities, and failed to understand the legitimate concerns expressed in Latin American nationalism. Rockefeller envisioned a new era in which government, business, and philanthropic agencies would work in partnership with one another and with Latin Americans to promote mutual understanding and encourage development. After World War II, Rockefeller selected Venezuela as one of the countries where he would seek to fulfill that vision.

Chapters three through six form the core of the book, detailing Rockefeller's efforts to launch both for-profit and philanthropic organizations in Venezuela to promote development. To that end, Rockefeller created the Venezuelan Basic Economy Corporation (VBEC) and the American International Association (AIA). VBEC, designed as a partnership between the Rockefeller interests, the Venezuelan government, foreign oil companies, and local investors would launch for-profit enterprises that would promote economic development and seek positive social consequences, while encouraging local entrepreneurship. AIA, on the other hand, would follow a more traditional model of philanthropic efforts, such as those by the Rockefeller

Foundation, initiating programs designed to encourage economic development and improve the well-being of the Venezuelan population.

Both VBEC and AIA endeavors emphasized improving agricultural productivity and output, in keeping with the accepted wisdom of development economics that agricultural efficiency was an essential step on the road to economic advancement. The for-profit initiatives included large-scale estates to raise cattle and produce a variety of crops from sugar cane to rice; enterprises to improve the fishing industry; and projects to enhance food distribution. AIA established programs to provide extension services and credit. The great strength of Rivas's work is her analysis of why these initiatives, especially the for-profit enterprises, proved far less successful than similar endeavors by Rockefeller in Brazil.

An array of factors affected the Rockefeller organizations, including left-wing political attacks, wavering Venezuelan government support, opposition from local business interests, who feared being overwhelmed by powerful American capitalists, and poor planning by the American administrators of both VBEC and AIA. Ironically, these organizations exhibited precisely the kinds of failings by American entrepreneurs and technocrats that had prompted Rockefeller to launch his programs in the first place. VBEC companies often hired managers who could not speak Spanish, and the fishing enterprise failed to adapt successfully to local conditions. In general, the Rockefeller initiatives relied too heavily on U.S. technical experts. Aside from their contribution to a better understanding of U.S.–Latin American relations in this period, the core chapters of the book offer valuable insights into the types of problems and mistakes that have troubled the activities of American corporations, the development agencies of the U.S. government, and philanthropic organizations. But Rivas is less successful in fulfilling her other goal.

The problem with Rivas's efforts to demonstrate that Rockefeller was not an avaricious capitalist promoting a policy of U.S. domination and exploitation of Latin Americans is that these are essentially nonissues. Several decades ago, dependency analysts established that foreign interests exploited Latin American economies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through a series of relations with local elites who benefited from the activities of foreign investors. In fact, no country's history better illustrates this kind of relationship than Venezuela. Furthermore, serious scholars generally accept the fact that Nelson Rockefeller personified a new breed of reformed American capitalists, who introduced social welfare programs into their dealings with labor at home and abroad and sought to make themselves partners in the development of Latin American countries. The real issue is whether the type of reformed capitalism represented by Rockefeller reinforced the dependent, exploitative relations of the past.

For this important question, Rivas does not provide an answer. Furthermore, the closing chapters, which describe Rockefeller's government service in the 1950s, tend to underestimate his true importance. By then, Rockefeller had developed a vision of a global, interdependent capitalist economy driven by U.S. foreign investment, whose development would be facilitated by centralized coordination of the activities of capitalists, government agencies, and philanthropic associations. Rivas argues that this initiative never achieved the sort of centralized government direction that Rockefeller envisioned. Yet she fails to note that such centralization was probably unnecessary, because members of the American elite like Rockefeller could and did move easily from positions in the corporate world to government and philanthropic sectors and back again. Rivas also neglects to point out that Rockefeller had sketched out an accurate vision of, and plan for, the new wave of globalization that swept Latin America in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Early in the twenty-first century, the fact remains that more than one-third of Latin Americans are trapped in poverty, and the rising tide of resentment against economic stagnation and social injustice raises serious doubts about the process of globalization that Rockefeller so ardently championed.

Rivas's book represents a strong contribution to our understanding of the intricacies of U.S.–Latin American relations, but its larger issues concerning the exploitation of Latin America and the efficacy of Nelson Rockefeller's vision for the region's future will require a more comprehensive study of these issues.

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