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Defense of the Hemisphere: An Historical Postscript

By JOSE F. MATA

National Archives

PB4Y-1 on patrol, 1943.

In times of major crisis, the nations of the Western Hemisphere have traditionally put aside their differences and united in a common cause. Such was the case during World War II when the Americas came together in collective defense well before becoming actively involved in that terrible conflict. The defense of the hemisphere was a top priority then as it is today. Historically, the Monroe Doctrine has been the cornerstone of U.S. security policy in the region. An outside threat to one country was viewed as a threat by all its neighbors. Thus, when aggression in Europe and Asia began to spread across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans between 1939 and 1941, Washington, in partnership with many nations in Latin America, took steps to deal with what was becoming a world-wide conflict.

In April 1939, the Joint Army-Navy Board determined that the only way in which the hemisphere could be assailed was from a base of operation on the coast of West Africa. The board

estimated that subsequent operations could project combat power to Brazil. The fall of France in 1940, the anomalous status of French colonies in Africa during 1940–41, and German successes in North Africa in 1941–1942 gave substance to this view. As the crisis intensified continental security became more critical for the Americas. In March 1942, General George Marshall, chief of staff of the U.S. Army, expressed his concern to the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) and requested a quick response to the threat:

Without delay, we soldiers must show the way to our countries, not only how to defend our nations and the heritage of our American tradition, but also to make sure there will be no challenge to our strong position and united strength.

Defensive Arcs

Before World War II, Washington adopted the so-called “good neighbor” policy to promote a spirit of cooperation throughout the region and facilitate a series of conferences addressing

the defense of the hemisphere. At the Buenos Aires conference in 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt articu-

lated the need for the *new* world to unite against threats from the *old* world to avert war. The Declaration of Lima in 1938 reaffirmed that American republics would help each other if attacked. Subsequent meetings took place in Panama in 1939 and Havana in 1940. The former resulted in the Declaration of Panama that promulgated a neutral zone of 300 miles into the Pacific and Atlantic for belligerent warships. The latter, prompted by the defeat of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, discussed administration of French and Dutch possessions in this hemisphere, especially regarding potential Axis interference. Finally, the Rio de Janeiro conference of foreign ministers in 1942 established IABD to coordinate and plan defense measures. It was comprised of military, naval, and air attachés from most nations of the hemisphere who met regularly to consider improvements in regional defense. The Rio conference also recommended an immediate meeting of military and naval technicians from each nation be convened in Washington to suggest defensive measures. This conference was significant because it was the first time military representatives of each nation discussed hemispheric

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security. A common threat unified the Americas as the “good neighbor” policy gradually evolved into a more cohesive strategy that promoted both co-

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operation and the interests of every American state.

In the Atlantic, hemispheric security revolved around a defensive arc of land, naval, and air bases from Newfoundland and Bermuda to Puerto Rico and the Windward Islands. In the Pacific, a similar security perimeter stretched from the Aleutians through the Hawaiian Islands to Panama with outposts in the Philippines and islands. While all Rainbow war plans incorporated defensive arcs or perimeters, they relied on participation by all nations in the Western Hemisphere through bilateral or multilateral agreements and provision of support bases and forces. The United States therefore pursued basing rights in the hemisphere for defensive perimeters. The Destroyer-Base Agreement between Washington and London in 1940 secured bases in Bermuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, Trinidad, and British Guiana in exchange for 50 vintage destroyers. At the same time the formation of the U.S. Army Caribbean Defense Command provided for multinational defense of the Caribbean, Panama Canal, and the corresponding sealanes.

The U.S. Army Caribbean Defense Command formed part of a larger Continental Defense Organization which included Eastern, Central, Southern, and Western Defense Commands. Of the 379,000 soldiers assigned to continental defense, 185,000 were combat troops including 140,000 who served in antiaircraft and coast artillery units. The Navy created Eastern, Western, Gulf Sea, Caribbean, and Panama sea frontiers to defend sealanes. The Army had responsibility for land-based air defenses while the

South Atlantic Air Routes, 1941–43



Source: Barry W. Fowle, editor, *Builders and Fighters: U.S. Army Engineers in World War II* (Fort Belvoir, Virginia: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History, 1992).

Navy protected the sea approaches. The former had to safeguard the trans-Atlantic routes and convoys of merchant ships with troops and critical supplies bound for allied nations. Only when the threat of invasion subsided were the theaters reduced and eventually inactivated. In practice, the Allied offensives in Europe, Axis inability to project power overseas, and German intelligence ineptitude limited Axis effectiveness in the Western Hemisphere to the U-boat campaign.

Since a critical portion of the defensive perimeter consisted of land fortifications, the Army upgraded coastal defenses with the latest artillery pieces and target detecting radars. These measures significantly improved the range and effectiveness of ground defenses, enabling them to engage targets at longer range. Washington also offered displaced guns to its Western Hemisphere allies under provisions of Lend-Lease legislation to improve their coastal defenses, thereby helping them to establish a more coherent defense against invasion.¹

Following the attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet and Hawaiian Islands in December 1941, the Western Command received a higher priority. The theater was reinforced by antiaircraft units and 250,000 soldiers to defend the west coast. The Navy had initially given top priority to the Pacific theater. At the time the Japanese posed the greatest sea threat while the British navy was strong enough to control the Atlantic and contiguous waters. But as victories at the Coral Sea and Midway reduced the Japanese threat in the Pacific, the havoc caused by German submarines in the Atlantic became a pressing problem. During the first six months of 1942 Allied losses to U-boats rose from about 200,000 tons to 700,000 tons monthly, mostly from merchant ships sunk off the coast of Brazil and in the Caribbean.²

The sinking of merchant ships probably posed the most significant threat to the hemisphere and war effort since it could interdict the flow of troops and materiel. The situation so concerned Marshall that on June 19, 1942 he told Admiral Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations, that “losses by submarines off our Atlantic seaboard

and in the Caribbean now threaten our entire war effort. . . .” At that time the Navy was still preoccupied with halting the Japanese advance in the Pacific and also lacked the forces to conduct a comprehensive anti-submarine campaign in the western Atlantic.

Cooperation and Foresight

The Atlantic crisis was overcome only by innovation, cooperation, dedication, sacrifice, and support of each service throughout the hemisphere. One initial response to U-boat attacks was the conversion of commercial yachts to patrol ships for the northern ship lane patrol. These vessels policed coastal waters and provided advance warning to convoys. Similar unarmed ships, the so-called “hooligan navy,” were used, with yachtsmen forming a coastal picket patrol by May 1942. Moreover, civilian pilots disqualified from military service because of medical or age restrictions volunteered without pay to establish the Civil Air Patrol, which ultimately reported 173 enemy submarine sightings. The Army agreed to allocate bombers to the Navy for long range anti-submarine patrolling. An anti-submarine warfare school opened in 1942 which trained 1,374 men from 14 nations. Production of submarine chasers was a national priority that resulted in hundreds of ships being available for convoy escort duty by 1942. The coastal convoy system, also organized in 1942, ran the length of the U.S. east coast and interconnected with other major shipping points in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean as well as off Brazil and West Africa.

Each nation in the hemisphere played a defensive role by patrolling its coasts and waters. This was especially the case in the Caribbean where critical shipping lanes to Europe and Africa as well as traffic passing through the Panama Canal had to be protected. Many nations agreed to base U.S. forces to reinforce the defensive perimeter. The United States augmented this coalition under bilateral agreements and security assistance, and the Navy stationed vessels and aircraft in the Caribbean and South America to facilitate patrol and escort missions.

Mexico, for example, allowed the forward basing of U.S. aircraft to support Panama. In the process, the United States and Mexico drafted plans for defending the Mexican northwest and U.S. southwest. Farther south, Brazil was critical because of its proximity to north Africa. Thus, the United States sought bases in the ports of Recife, Natal, and Salvador, and on Fernando de Noronha Island. Marines guarded Brazilian airfields at Belem, Natal, and Recife. The Army built a major airfield in Puerto Rico. Trinidad and Aruba contributed minesweepers, cutters, and bases, while Cuba furnished small gunboats to escort Florida-Havana seartrains, and one sank a German U-176. Moreover, a reaction force of 50,000 troops was available to

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defend against enemy landings. Continental security was a joint and coalition effort.

Although the western theater saw extremely limited combat compared to others, the security of the Americas was critical to establishing bases for launching offensive operations. This secure environment facilitated production of equipment and resupply of global forces. The cooperation and foresight of key leaders throughout the hemisphere regarding basing agreements and security assistance made collective defense possible. Bilateral agreements also served to anchor security in the hemisphere. The United States and Mexico, for example, agreed to allow their forces to cross each other's border if warranted. Some nations also provided offensive forces. Mexico deployed a fighter squadron to Luzon in the Pacific while Brazil marshaled an infantry division and support troops which fought with the U.S. Fifth Army in Italy. Brazil also sent a fighter squadron to the European theater and its navy helped to escort convoys across the Atlantic. Moreover,

Brazil had planned to deploy a larger expeditionary force—comprised of three infantry divisions, an armored division, and aviation squadrons with support units—but encountered difficulties in organizing and transporting it. Nevertheless, such contributions increased the strength and effectiveness of Allied combat forces and solidified the war effort by providing access to raw materials. Additionally, the deployment of combat forces by Latin American nations underscored their commitment to the war.³

Allied landings in North Africa further reduced the threat to the Western Hemisphere, and the defeat of the Afrika Korps in 1943 removed the prospect of an invasion of Brazil. In addition, the enemy submarine fleet had been greatly reduced together with any threat to the continent from the Pacific. However, the defense structure of the hemisphere remained intact until the end of World War II and ultimately provided the foundation for postwar cooperation.

World War II united a hemisphere and in the process brought together the peoples of many nations. The timely commitment by the United States to the “good neighbor” policy facilitated this climate of cooperation. Genuine unity of effort led to both stability and security in the hemisphere despite a grave outside threat. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild, *The Framework of Hemisphere Defense: U.S. Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1960); and Stetson Conn, Byron Fairchild, and Rose C. Engelman, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts: U.S. Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964).

² For shipping losses to U-boats and details on other events, see Barrie Pitt, *The Battle of the Atlantic: World War II* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1977).

³ Charles E. Kirkpatrick, *Defense of the Americas: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, World War II commemorative series (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1991).