This paper explores the United States’ first forays into state-sponsored business in Latin America through the diplomat Joel Roberts Poinsett. Poinsett served as one of the first diplomatic agents to South America during the continent’s independence wars in the early 1810s, and a decade later, as the United States’ first minister plenipotentiary to Mexico. Globalization ebbs and flows throughout history; Poinsett was at the forefront of nineteenth-century trends in the shrinking of distance and the increase of information flows and economic integration. He helps us understand in more precise ways how the United States began to establish business ties with newly independent Latin American nations. Over fifteen years ago, Geoffrey Jones called on business historians working on globalization to ask “how,” rather than “why” and to shift their attention from macroeconomic factors to firms and to individuals within firms. Before U.S. firms could succeed, federal officials like Poinsett laid the groundwork for the cross border activities that created the global economy.

Poinsett’s two major appointments in Latin America make ideal case studies for understanding nascent US-Latin American economic relations and the beginnings of hemispheric globalization. They occurred about a decade apart at the start and end of the independence period. The manuscript drafts of Poinsett’s reports to the State Department, as well as the letters he wrote to and received from businessmen and political figures highlight nascent US interests and the ways in which U.S. officials worked out how best to take advantage of opportunities posed by new nations. Even as scholars have recognized the economic component of US sympathies to Latin American independence, they have paid less attention to the ways these economic interests constrained globalization. Poinsett’s overt and covert dealings on behalf of Latin American independence and economic interest reveal that globalization’s economic integration was rooted not in free trade and market liberalism, but in national competition.