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Max J. Castro

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NOT A LOST CONTINENT: U.S. - Latin American Relations in the Bush Era

Max J. Castro

U.S.-centric analyses of the relationship between this country and the nations of south of the Rio Grande generally hold that in recent years Latin America has “fallen off the map.” Authors in this school usually lament the low priority United States foreign policy traditionally has assigned to the region—absent revolutions and attribute the current level of especially pronounced inattention to the influence of 9-11.

Moisés Naím, editor in chief of *Foreign Policy*, in an article titled “The Lost Continent” that appeared in the November/December 2006 issue of the same journal, exemplifies this widely held view. Virtually equating U.S. priorities under the Bush administration with the concerns of the international community, Naím describes what happened after the terrorist attacks of 2001: “Naturally, the world’s attention centered almost exclusively on terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, and on the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran” (emphasis added).

Because Latin America lacks nuclear weapons, suicidal terrorists, big “emerging markets like India and China,” and has only one country with really major energy resources (Venezuela), the continent “can’t compete on the world’s stage in any aspect, even as a threat.” Indeed, Latin America can’t even compete as an object of pity because its tragedies pale in comparison to Africa’s.

The situation looks quite different, however, if one departs from the “we are the world” perspective from which Naím and others in the same camp see the world exclusively through the eyes of the world’s hegemonic nation. A different reality comes into view if instead we look at the U.S.-Latin American relationship starting from the assumption that *el sur también existe*.

The United States may have lost sight of Latin America, but Latin America has hardly ceased to exist and evolve, nor has it taken its eye off the United States. And, in the last decades, and especially since the turn of the century, there have been some significant developments, both in Latin America and in the

region’s relationship with its northern neighbor. The new Washington consensus that consigns the region to irrelevance tends to miss or disregard these almost completely.

One obvious change is that Latin America has become more independent and less subservient to the United States. This is arguably a historic development despite the fact that it takes place within the context of continuing U.S. global and regional dominance and profound north-south asymmetries in power and wealth in this hemisphere. There are myriad manifestations of the new phenomenon coming in different forms and at multiple levels. In country after country, Latin American voters have demonstrated that they are perfectly willing to vote for leaders the United States opposes. At one point, a former U.S. ambassador to Bolivia weighted in heavily with threats if the leftist candidate were to be elected. Bolivian reaction at the grass roots was such that Evo Morales, the target of the attacks, said the ambassador was acting as his campaign manager. Later, Morales easily won the presidency. In 1989, U.S. threats undoubtedly scared some Nicaraguan voters into throwing the Sandinistas out of power. In 2006, the meddling of the U.S. ambassador did not work and may have backfired; Nicaraguans elected Daniel Ortega, despite the fact that Ortega has lost much of his revolutionary luster.

These democratically elected leaders, in turn, while still trying to maintain friendly relations with the United States, have demonstrated a substantially greater independence from Washington than earlier generations of Latin American rulers.¹ Unlike previously, however, there now are stricter limits in relation to the lengths Latin American governments will go in order to please the United States.

The Bush administration tried hard but, to its great chagrin, failed to twist the arms of the Latin American members of the UN Security Council into approving a resolution authorizing the invasion of Iraq. Not only Chile but even Fox’s Mexico refused to go along, denying the Bush administration even the veneer of

legitimacy for its illegal war.

Such a declaration of independence on the part of Latin America and such a diplomatic defeat for the United States on a key issue is all the more significant because it came at the hand of countries with which the United States has had very friendly relations. Both countries, moreover, had a strong national interest in being looked upon favorably by Bush, who could confer significant rewards or inflict punishment in key areas including trade (Chile) and immigration (Mexico).

The attitude of Mexico and Chile vis-à-vis Iraq is a measure of the weakness of the U.S. case for war but also reflects the impact of electoral democracy. Latin Americans have a long and painful history with U.S. intervention and, partly as a result, voters in the region were massively opposed to the war. Only in the Middle East is public opinion about Bush and his foreign policy more intensely negative than in Latin America. According to some surveys, even the region's privileged elites have a more favorable opinion of Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro than they do of Bush. Thus the political cost of subservience on Iraq would have been great, greater in fact than any punishment Bush might deliver. While in the Middle East, the democracy the United States has preached has taken hold in only a few places, in Latin America democracy is now the norm. But, in both regions, wherever democracy has triumphed, the results often have not pleased Washington.

Moreover, while the aborted 2003 UN vote on Iraq was a major departure from the past, it was no anomaly. Since that time, Latin America has given other signs of its assertiveness. In electing a new Secretary-General, the OAS rejected two candidates successively backed by the United States and elected a third, a Chilean socialist. Later, the same organization failed to approve a new "democratic charter" the Bush administration hoped could be used as a club against Venezuela and any other miscreants that might pop up in the region. More recently, the U.S. choice for the country to represent Latin America on the UN Security Council failed to win approval.

On the economic front, Brazil has been among the countries leading the charge against a model of regional and global economic integration tailored to the needs of the United States and other wealthy nations. More generally, the region's economic dependence on the United States has decreased as relations with Europe, Japan, and lately China have increased. And, Argentina has shown that one can not only defy the Washington consensus and the IMF and survive but one can prosper by doing it.

Wishful thinkers and media purveyors of convenient truths in the United States like to dwell on the real and significant differences between such leaders as Chávez, Lula, Bachelet, Morales, Ortega, Tabaré Vázquez, and Kirchner. But they usually fail to note the historical significance of the fact that for the first time in history many leaders of major Latin American countries, despite their divergences on matters of style and substance, have decided to say "no" to the United States. Thus, while the big North American cat has been away, busy trying to remake the Middle East in its own image, the Latin American mice have been playing their own game.

A second important development, distinct from but unrelated to the fist and with broad implications for relations between the United States and Latin America has been the growing ideological divergence between north and south. Since the presidency of Ronald Reagan and, especially, during the current administration, U.S. politics has been dominated by the ideology of laissez faire capitalism or, in the words of the late Pope John Paul II, by the precepts of a "savage capitalism."

Beginning in the late 1980s, the United States and the international financial institutions, through massive coercion and a modicum of persuasion, induced many Latin American countries to adopt economic policies consistent with the ideology that came to be known as neoliberalism. Although the term never acquired wide usage in this country, during this same period the United States itself was instituting similar policies domestically (although not under external coercion nor in as radical a form as it demanded from other countries) under such euphemistic terms as "supply-side economics," "welfare reform," and "tax reform."

While some of these measures were necessary to curtail inflation and tackle other economic ills, overall the consequences of U.S.-style "trickle down economics" and neoliberalism in Latin America, for vast sectors of the middle class and for most of the poor in the United States and even more dramatically in Latin America, have ranged from devastating to disappointing.

In Latin America, the failure of neoliberalism to deliver a better life for most people has led to political defeat for many of the leaders and the political forces backing neoliberal policies and the emergence of new leadership offering moderate or radical alternatives to neoliberalism.

In contrast, in the United States neither major political party has offered voters an alternative to laissez faire ideology or to the absolute corporate domination of societal priorities. Here the politics of symbolism, moralism, patriotism, and emotion have prevailed even as economic inequality has reached unprecedented dimensions and the real wages of blue and white collar workers have stagnated. (The 2006 elections may or may not signal the early phases of the reversal of this trend. If they do, the reaction of U.S. citizens to hypercapitalist policies may come to be seen as slower but not essentially different to the Latin American reaction).

The result of these divergent paths has been, to use an admittedly extremely rough analogy, is that, if the color scheme used to map U.S. electoral results were to be transposed to map Latin America, much of the map would be a deep blue, with big patches of red in Colombia and Central America, with Mexico displaying an almost equal division between the two colors.

In the United States, while the electorate has been almost equally divided during recent elections, a map of the distribution of power over the last six years would reveal the overwhelming domination of the Republican right.

This analogy, if anything, understates the stark ideological divide for what currently passes for liberal or even left in the United States, for example the policies favored by the mainstream of the Democratic Party, would be considered right or center-right in much of Latin America today.

While Latin America has been moving leftward, the conservative thrust has been so powerful and seemingly enduring that in a recent book some European observers described the United States as "The Right Nation."² This ideological divide, which separates the United States from Latin America on many issues, has significant implications for the future of hemispheric relations. The U.S. rejection of the kind of social democratic/redistributionist policies that were inherent in the construction of the European Union is a source of Latin American resistance to U.S. schemes to promote regional economic integration. Undoubtedly, it is one of the underlying reasons for the downfall of such U.S.-sponsored projects as the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

A third major new development with long term implications for the U.S.-Latin American relationship is migration and,

perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, the overall growth of the Latino population of the United States. The latter is a demographic process driven both by high levels of immigration and a fast rate of natural increase within the Latino population.³

Mass migration weaves a complex network of social, cultural, economic and political relationships and interdependencies between north and south with consequences that are not yet completely understood.

Economically, for many Latin American countries, remittances have become crucial at both the national and the household level. At the same time, politically and economically important sectors of the U.S. economy are structurally dependent of immigrant Latin American labor. The latter fact, and the rapid growth of the Latino electorate, undercuts the kind of draconian immigration policy favored by, for instance, the Republican majority that controlled the House of Representatives during the last Congress. It also likely ensures relatively high levels of Latin American immigration for the foreseeable future and thus growing Latino political and economic clout.

To date, the Cuban American exception aside, Latino influence on U.S. policies regarding Latin American has been scant at best. But this may change as the Latino population as a whole and various national subgroups reach a critical mass, nationally and in an expanding set of geographical spaces across the nation.

The immigrant marches of 2006 may presage a new level of Latino activism and consciousness that might be mobilized for purposes other than exercising a virtual veto against extreme anti-immigration policies. However, that veto is, in itself, already an important Latino contribution to the interests of Latin Americans.

But the main impact of growing Latino political power on U.S.-Latin American relations depends on the role Latinos play in determining the overall balance of political forces in the United States. In the 2006 Congressional elections, 70 percent of Latinos voted for Democratic candidates, a swing of 10-15 percentage points against the Republicans compared to the general elections of 2004. Exit polls suggest Latino rejection of the Republicans was based not only on the party's immigration stance but also on Latino opposition to the Iraq war and to Republican domestic policies.

Any prospect for a more enlightened U.S. policy regarding Latin America requires the emergence of a progressive politics in the United States. The role of Latinos, in alliance with other minorities and liberal whites, would be a key to such a political evolution. While the realization of such a scenario is neither immediate nor certain, the recent election indicates that Latinos already are contributing to checking the power of the most reactionary forces in the U.S. political system.

In the meantime, while a Democratic Congress may slightly temper the tension in U.S.-Latin American relations, overall the immediate prospects are still pessimistic. Washington is certain to deplore the probate reelection of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and to be vexed if the candidate of the left wins the election in Ecuador. Latin Americans for their part abhor the border fence scheduled to be built on the U.S.-Mexico border, an initiative of the Republican Congressional right signed into law this fall by George W. Bush—in spite of the President's rhetoric in favor of a moderately gentler and kinder version of immigration reform. Finally, notwithstanding predictable Congressional pressure to relax the most extreme components of the embargo, under Bush the United States will continue to wage economic war against Cuba, a policy which acts as a constant reminder to many Latin

Americans that the leopard refuses to change its spots.

NOTES

¹ Hugo Chávez is the exception in regard to the first point, although one can argue that while Chávez's words have been confrontational his actions have been much less so while the United States generally has talked in softer tones but undertaken some decidedly hostile actions against Chávez, especially the apparent tacit (or active?) support for the failed coup.

² See: *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in Latin America* by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, New York, Penguin Press, 2004.

³ "Natural increase" is a term used in population studies which refers to the number of births minus the number of deaths in a given population over a defined time period. Overall, the Latino population is younger than the U.S. populations as a whole, thus there are proportionally fewer deaths and more women of child-bearing age in the Latino population. In addition, statistically Latinas bear more children than the average for women in the United States. These factors make for a higher rate of natural increase among Latinos than in the general population.

MAX J. CASTRO is a sociologist and an independent researcher and writer. Contact him: maxjcastro@yahoo.com

