

# Obama's Real Plan in Latin America

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At first glance Obama seems to have softened U.S. policy toward Latin America, especially when compared to his predecessor. There has been no shortage of editorials praising Obama's conciliatory approach while comparing it to FDR's "Good Neighbor" Latin American policy.

It's important to remember, however, that FDR's vision of being neighborly meant that the U.S. would merely stop direct military interventions in Latin America, while reserving the right to create and prop up dictators, arm and train unpopular regional militaries, promote economic dominance through free trade and bank loans, conspire with right-wing groups, etc...

And although Obama's policy towards Latin America has a similar subversive feeling to it, many of FDR's methods of dominance are closed to him. Decades of U.S. "good neighbor" policy in Latin America resulted in a continuous string of U.S. backed military coups, broken-debtor economies, and consequently, a hemisphere-wide revolt.

Many of the heads of states that Obama mingled with at the Summit of the Americas came to power because of social movements born out of opposition to U.S. foreign policy. The utter hatred of U.S. dominance in the region is so intense that any attempt by Obama to reassert U.S. authority would result in a backlash, and Obama knows it.

Bush had to learn this the hard way, when his pathetic attempt to tame the region led to a humiliation at the 2005 Summit, where for the first time Latin American countries defeated yet another U.S. attempt to use the Organization of American States (O.A.S.), as a tool for U.S. foreign policy.

But while Obama humbly discussed hemispheric issues on an "equal footing" with his Latin American counterparts at the recent Summit of Americas, he has subtly signaled that U.S. foreign policy will be business as usual.

The least subtle sign that Obama is toeing the line of previous U.S. governments — both Republican and Democrat — is his stance on Cuba. Obama has postured as being a progressive when it comes to Cuba by relaxing some travel and financial restrictions, while leaving the much more important issue, the economic embargo, firmly in place.

When it comes to the embargo, the U.S. is completely unpopular and isolated in the hemisphere. The U.S. two-party system, however, just can't let the matter go.

The purpose of the embargo is not to pressure Cuba into being more democratic: this lie can be easily refuted by the numerous dictators the U.S. has supported in the hemisphere, not to mention dictators the U.S. is currently propping up all over the Middle East and

elsewhere.

The real purpose behind the embargo is what Cuba represents. To the entire hemisphere, Cuba remains a solid source of pride. Defeating the U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion while remaining fiercely independent in a region dominated by U.S. corporations and past government interventions has made Cuba an inspiration to millions of Latin Americans. This profound break from U.S. dominance — in its “own backyard” no less — is not so easily forgiven.

There is also a deeper reason for not removing the embargo. The foundation of the Cuban economy is arranged in such a way that it threatens the most basic philosophic principle shared by the two-party system: the market economy (capitalism).

And although the “fight against communism” may seem like a dusty relic from the cold war era, the current crisis of world capitalism is again posing the question: is there another way to organize society?

Even with Cuba’s immense lack of resources and technology (further aggravated by the U.S. embargo), the achievements made in healthcare, education, and other fields are enough to convince many in the region that there are aspects of the Cuban economy — most notably the concept of producing to meet the needs of all Cubans and NOT for private profit — worth repeating.

Hugo Chavez has been the Latin American leader most inspired by the Cuban economy. Chavez has made important steps toward breaking from the capitalist economic model and has insisted that socialism is “the way forward” — and much of the hemisphere agrees.

This is the sole reason that Obama continues the Bush-era hostility towards Chavez. Obama, it is true, has been less blunt about his feelings towards Chavez, though he has publicly stated that Chavez “exports terrorism” and is an “obstacle to progress.” Both accusations are, at best, petty lies. Chavez drew the correct conclusion of the comments by saying:

“He [Obama] said I’m an obstacle for progress in Latin America; therefore, it must be removed, this obstacle, right?”

It’s important to point out that, while Obama was “listening and learning” at the Summit of Americas, the man he appointed to coordinate the summit, Jeffrey Davidow, was busily spewing anti-Venezuelan venom in the media.

This disinformation is necessary because of the “threat” that Chavez represents. The threat here is against U.S. corporations in Venezuela, who feel, correctly, that they are in danger of being taken over by the Venezuelan government, to be used for social needs in the country instead of private profit. Obama, like his predecessor, believes that such an act would be against “U.S. strategic interests,” thus linking the private profit of mega-corporations acting in a foreign country to the general interests of the United States.

In fact, this belief that the U.S. government must protect and promote U.S. corporations acting abroad is the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, not only in Latin America, but the world.

Prior to the revolutionary upsurges that shook off U.S. puppet governments in the region, Latin America was used exclusively by U.S. corporations to extract raw materials at rock bottom prices, using cheap labor to reap super profits, while the entire region was dominated by U.S. banks.

Things have since changed dramatically. Latin American countries have taken over industries that were privatized by U.S. corporations, while both Chinese and European companies have been given the green light to invest to an extent that U.S. corporations are being pushed aside.

To Obama and the rest of the two-party system, this is unacceptable. The need to reassert U.S. corporate control in the hemisphere is high on the list of Obama's priorities, but he's going about it in a strategic way, following the path paved by Bush.

After realizing that the U.S. was unable to control the region by more forceful methods (especially because of two losing wars in the Middle East), Bush wisely chose to fall back a distance and fortify his position. The lone footholds available to Bush in Latin America were, unsurprisingly, the only two far-right governments in the region: Colombia and Mexico.

Bush sought to strengthen U.S. influence in both governments by implementing Plan Colombia first, and the Meridia Initiative second (also known as Plan Mexico). Both programs allow for huge sums of U.S. taxpayer dollars to be funneled to these unpopular governments for the purpose of bolstering their military and police, organizations that in both countries have atrocious human rights records.

In effect, the diplomatic relationship with these strong U.S. "allies" — coupled with the financial and military aide, acts to prop up both governments, which possibly would have fallen otherwise (Bush was quick to recognize Mexico's new President, Calderon, despite evidence of large-scale voter fraud). Both relationships were legitimized by the typical rhetoric: the U.S. was helping Colombia and Mexico fight against "narco-terrorists."

The full implication of these relationships was revealed when, on March 1st 2008, the Colombian military bombed a FARC base in Ecuador without warning (the U.S. and Colombia view the FARC as a terrorist organization). The Latin American countries organized in the "Rio Group" denounced the raid, and the region became instantly destabilized (both Bush and Obama supported the bombing).

The conclusion that many in the region have drawn — most notably Chavez — is that the U.S. is using Colombia and Mexico as a counterbalance to the loss of influence in the region. By building powerful armies in both countries, the potential to intervene in the affairs of other countries in the region is greatly enhanced.

Obama has been quick to put his political weight firmly behind Colombia and Mexico. While singing the praises of Plan Colombia, Obama made a special trip to Mexico before the Summit of the Americas to strengthen his alliance with Felipe Calderon, promising more U.S. assistance in Mexico's "drug war."

What these actions make clear is that Obama is continuing the age old game of U.S. imperialism in Latin America, though less directly than previous administrations. Obama's attempt at "good neighbor" politics in the region will inevitably be restricted by the nagging demands of "U.S. strategic interests," i.e., the demands of U.S. corporations to dominate the

markets, cheap labor, and raw materials of Latin America. And while it is one thing to smile for the camera and shake the hands of Latin American leaders at the Summit of the Americas, U.S. corporations will demand that Obama be pro-active in helping them reassert themselves in the region, requiring all the intrigue and maneuvering of the past.

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