



LOSING LATIN AMERICA

America's 'backyard' has never been so united and independent of U.S. influence.

By STEVE ELLNER

Resumen.

El abandono por parte del Presidente Obama, de la tradición liberal en su postura en América latina ha sido consecuencia de la necesidad de aplacar a sus críticos derechistas. Por ejemplo: el cambio sobre el acuerdo de libre comercio con Colombia por encima de las posiciones internas en contra. La capitulación a las exigencias de la derecha en Honduras. Otro incidente que demostró la capacidad de republicanos de establecer la agenda en Washington, así como las vacilaciones de la administración de Obama, era el nombramiento de Larry Palmer como embajador a Venezuela. A pesar de convergencias, el estilo y las políticas de Obama en América latina son apenas indistinguibles a las viejas políticas de los republicanos en América Latina.

a la su derecha. Obama todo-sonríe encuentro con Chávez en 2009 y Clinton en enero de este año reforzó la noción del presidente del contrato con los enemigos, absolutamente diferente usted de George W. Bush de "está conmigo o contra mí" el acercamiento.

Finalmente, esta línea de pensamiento privilegia naciones como Colombia, Chile y México como aliados especiales simplemente porque aceptan fórmulas financieras aprobadas por políticas monetarias internacionales y de libre cambio con los Estados Unidos. Tales preferencias dividen el continente en la mitad y la distancia América de países como la Argentina y el Brasil, cuyo nacionalismo no están siempre a gusto de Washington.



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Abstract.

President Obama's abandonment of the liberal tradition in his stance on Latin America has been driven by the perceived need to placate rightist critics. For example: pressed for quick passage of a free trade agreement with Colombia, and since then has followed up on the proposal. Obama's change—from opposition to the free trade agreement with Colombia, to lukewarm endorsement of it, to vigorous support—is just one example of his turnabout on Latin American policy. Capitulation to the right on Honduras. Another incident that demonstrated the ability of Republicans to set the agenda in Washington, as well as the vacillations of the Obama administration, was the appointment of Larry Palmer as ambassador to Venezuela.

In spite of convergences, Obama's style and policies on Latin America are hardly indistinguishable from Republicans to his right. Obama's all-smile encounter with Chávez in 2009 and Clinton's in January of this year reinforced the president's notion of engagement with enemies, quite different from George W. Bush's "you're with me or against me" approach.

Finally, Washington needs to cease equating the open-market economic policies it advocates with democracy. This line of thinking privileges nations like Colombia, Chile and Mexico as special allies simply because they accept International Monetary Fund-approved formulas and free trade with the United States. Such preferences divide the continent in half and distance America from countries like Argentina and Brazil, whose assertions of nationalism are not always to Washington's liking. The hardliners will rant and rave about any type of renovation of U.S. foreign policy along these lines, but it may represent an important first step in regaining the respect and good will of what used to be called our backyard.



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Article.

In his State of the Union address in January, President Obama pressed for quick passage of a free trade agreement with Colombia, and since then has followed up on the proposal. In doing so he has delighted Republicans who had been accusing him of failing to prioritize the issue. In his January speech, Obama made no reference to his unequivocal concern over human rights violations which he had raised in his third presidential debate with McCain.

Since 2008, little has improved to justify Obama's reversal. Human Rights Watch has reported a 41 percent increase in the number of victims in 2010 over the previous year, including the murder of 44 trade unionists. In the first six weeks of 2011, death squads assassinated three more labor activists.

In an attempt to assure members of U.S. Congress that progress is being made, on April 7 Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and Obama announced from the White House the approval of an "Action Plan," whereby the Colombian government pledged to take stringent measures to curb abuses. Many Colombian trade union leaders, however, refused to buy into the arrangement and expressed skepticism about their government's resolve. Tarsicio Mora, president of the Unitary Workers Confederation (CUT), objected by saying, "It just can't be that respect for a basic right established in the constitution, such as the right to life, has to be required by a commercial transaction."

Obama's new stand has also failed to win over U.S. trade unionists. In January, Communications Workers of America President Larry Cohen argued against the agreement by pointing out that 15 million Colombians representing 82 percent of the working population are not recognized as workers and thus under the law "have no rights."



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Obama's change—from opposition to the free trade agreement with Colombia, to lukewarm endorsement of it, to vigorous support—is just one example of his turnabout on Latin American policy. His modified stand distances Washington from an important bloc of Latin American governments and contributes to the decline of the U.S. leadership position in the hemisphere.

Up until his early months in office, Obama appeared to be following the path of liberal Democrats dating back to the 1930s. The liberal tradition on foreign policy toward Latin America was in many ways attractive. Key features included respect for the plurality of ideas – shown by Franklin D. Roosevelt's acceptance of Mexican nationalism and its nationalization of oil in 1938; the Kennedy administration's call to “complete the revolution of the Americas” through taxing the wealthy and land reform; and the suspension of aid by the Carter administration to several Latin American governments to protest human rights violation even though they were on the U.S. side in the Cold War.

During the presidential campaign, Obama not only stepped into this liberal tradition but defied the Democratic Party mainstream with positions different from those of his then-rival Hillary Clinton. Obama boldly proposed to meet with Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez and other Washington adversaries. At the same time he declared “I think our foreign policy is all messed up” and promised a “new direction” in Latin American relations.

Under the Obama administration, the United States finds its historically unrivaled position in the continent challenged on a number of fronts. This July, a summit in Caracas will formally inaugurate the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to group the 32 nations south of the Rio Grande and serve as a parallel organization to the traditionally U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS).



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Furthermore, in recent years of modest economic growth, Latin American nations have broadened commercial ties with nations outside of traditional spheres of U.S. influence, such as Russia, Iran and especially China. In 2010, China's direct non-financial investments abroad increased 36 percent, most of which went to Asia and Latin America, while the Asian powerhouse displaced Europe as Latin America's second largest trading partner (after the United States).

Obama, however, has failed to take bold moves to face the challenge. During his largely uneventful five-day tour of Latin America in March he did little to reverse the unfavorable trends. A statement of condemnation, or at least recognition, of the United States' long and sorry record of intervention would have represented a good first step in treating Latin American nations as "equal partners" – a pledge made by the president that created great expectations.

Instead, when asked by a Chilean journalist about Washington's role in the overthrow of Salvador Allende, Obama evaded the question. Furthermore, in Brazil, Obama failed to put forward concrete proposals to deal with the issue consistently raised by the Brazilians, namely U.S. agricultural subsidies and other practices that close the world's largest market for Latin American goods.

CAPITULATION TO THE RIGHT ON HONDURAS

Obama's abandonment of the liberal tradition in his stance on Latin America has been driven by the perceived need to placate rightist critics. Events following the overthrow of Honduran president José Manuel Zelaya in June 2009 put in evidence both the right's clout and Obama's failure to check the loss of U.S. influence. The Obama administration caved into pressure from Tea Partier Senator Jim DeMint of



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South Carolina, who justified the coup on grounds that Zelaya — along with Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega — were “would-be tyrants and dictators.”

In response to DeMint’s threat to block ratification by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of two key State Department appointments for Latin America, the Obama administration did another about-face. In late 2009, it went from condemnation of the overthrow of Zelaya and support for his return to power to endorsement of the elections sponsored by the coup leaders. Council of the Americas Policy Director Christopher Sabatini gave the South Carolina senator major credit for the change of policy, adding “DeMint’s role has been disproportionate to his interest in Latin America.”

The Obama administration had other options. It could have bypassed the senate committee by attempting to muster 60 votes on the senate floor, or else make the appointments when Congress was out of session, as Bush had done with his selection of John Bolton as UN ambassador. But either move would have meant giving up Obama’s much preferred style of “consensus politics.”

Since then the United States has been locked in an impasse over the issue of the democratic credentials of the Honduran government. In spite of Secretary of State Clinton’s active diplomacy, she has made little headway in convincing a group of Latin American governments to accept Honduras into the community of nations. The latest slap in the face to Honduran President Porfirio Lobo occurred in January when he was the only Latin American head of state to be excluded from the inauguration of Brazil President Dilma Rousseff.

The current battleground is the Organization of American States, which had suspended Honduras following the coup. A bloc of moderate South American governments including Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay have joined the



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more leftist ones of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador in opposing Honduras's re-admission. The moderates have conditioned their affirmative vote on allowing Zelaya to return to the country, restoring his political rights and lifting charges against him.

The State Department has pressured Honduran political players behind the scenes to meet these conditions, but the rightists in Honduras (although not Lobo himself) insist on Zelaya's prosecution on charges of abuse of power. In attempting to break the impasse, the State Department is working at cross purposes with Republican hardliners. Florida Congressman David Rivera, for instance, stated in January: "The United States should be encouraging Honduras to embrace their democratic system, and not to absolve former President Manuel Zelaya of criminal charges or allow him to return to Honduras."

U.S. efforts on behalf of Lobo ignore the evidence that violation of human rights has gone unabated under his rule (see "Campesinos Rising in Honduras" in *In These Times*' March 2011 issue). In December, Human Rights Watch documented dozens of abuses in 2010, including the assassination of 18 journalists and human rights activists and called on the government to "finalize the impunity." To date, nobody has been held criminally responsible for the atrocities committed since the coup.

VENEZUELAN RAPPROCHEMENT TORPEDOED

Another incident that demonstrated the ability of Republicans to set the agenda in Washington, as well as the vacillations of the Obama administration, was the appointment of Larry Palmer as ambassador to Venezuela. In August 2010, the nomination of Palmer appeared to be a routine matter until, upon the request of Republican Senator Richard Lugar, he agreed to answer questions from members of the Foreign Relations Committee in writing.



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In his responses, Palmer affirmed that the morale of the Venezuelan armed forces was “considerably low” and that the Chávez government had “clear ties” with Colombian guerrillas. Palmer’s statements were then posted on Lugar’s website even though the questioning was presumed to be for internal use only.

Predictably, Chávez considered the remarks unacceptable and vetoed the appointment, as most governments would have undoubtedly done. Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research commented that Washington insiders considered the incident a “set up from the right.”

On January 1, Secretary of State Clinton had a brief amicable encounter with Chávez at Rousseff’s inauguration in Brasilia. Two days later, then-Assistant Secretary of State Philip Crowley announced that given the importance of relations with Venezuela, Washington would “have to renominate an ambassador candidate.” The hardliners reacted immediately, including the Washington Post, which wrote that the appointment of another ambassador would “hand the caudillo [Chávez] a considerable propaganda victory.” The same day, Crowley changed course again by making clear that the government would stand by Palmer. Chávez blamed the latest reversal on pressure from Republicans.

Washington hardliners with a Cold War mindset place the blame for the face-off entirely on the Venezuelan government. Jose R. Cardenas, a State Department veteran known for his hard-line positions, stated “No matter how hard the Obama Administration tries to ‘reset’ U.S. relations with Latin America, Hugo Chávez is there to spoil the fun.” Yet Chávez’s decision was predictable and consistent with his nationalist stance all along. The Obama administration’s behind-the-scenes maneuvering to attempt to convince Caracas that Palmer’s statement came from a low-level State Department official was at best naïve.



A NEW STAGE IN HEMISPHERIC RELATIONS

In spite of convergences, Obama's style and policies on Latin America are hardly indistinguishable from Republicans to his right. Obama's all-smile encounter with Chávez in 2009 and Clinton's in January of this year reinforced the president's notion of engagement with enemies, quite different from George W. Bush's "you're with me or against me" approach. Furthermore, in January, Obama broke with hardliners by easing restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba.

Nevertheless, Obama stopped short of lifting the 50-year embargo, a proposition which he himself had supported prior to running for president and which Latin American governments unanimously endorse.

The new political environment in Latin America demands more than moderate measures and a change in style. Latin America has never been so united and independent of U.S. influence. In recent years, Latin American governments, without input from Washington, have acted collectively to help resolve major conflicts involving Bolivia's nationalization of Brazilian oil and gas interests, a coup attempt in Ecuador and Colombia's incursion on Ecuadorian territory.

CELAC, which will facilitate collective action on an ongoing basis, is not solely the initiative of countries like Venezuela and Bolivia. Even countries with centrist leadership such as Mexico, Chile and Colombia have wholeheartedly endorsed the plan. Chile, along with Venezuela, is currently drafting CELAC's statutes and will host the organization in 2012.

"With CELAC, the OAS will be put to the test," Venezuelan ambassador Jorge Valero told me. Whether or not it survives will depend on how much it really defends Latin American interests."



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But the biggest challenge to U.S. influence in Latin America is Brazil, an economic powerhouse. Over the recent past, the Brazilian government has pursued bold independent positions on foreign policy which it hopes will boost third-world support for its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Brazil went over the United States' head in attempting to broker an agreement with Iran on nuclear energy and has criticized U.S. plans to install facilities at seven military bases in Colombia. In December it recognized the Palestinian state with its pre-1967 boundaries. Brazil's increased political influence and its economic expansion go hand in hand. At the same time that President Lula defended the Palestinian cause on a trip to the West Bank, he pointed to a four-fold increase in Brazilian trade with the Middle East since 2002.

For U.S. hardliners, Lula strayed too far from acceptable diplomacy. During his last stretch in office, in the words of the Wall Street Journal, Lula pursued "an increasingly anti-American foreign policy."

The time period following President Obama's Latin American tour in March is an ideal moment for the administration to rethink its strategy for the continent. To check the loss of U.S. influence and prestige, the Obama administration needs to distance itself from Republican hardliners and reconnect with the best of the liberal tradition. Washington, for instance, should refrain from championing the cause of the Lobo government as long as it does little to break out of the banana republic mold. Furthermore, executive measures designed to eventually lift the trade embargo against Cuba would tear down one longstanding wall separating the United States from the rest of the continent — and the world.

Finally, Washington needs to cease equating the open-market economic policies it advocates with democracy. This line of thinking privileges nations like Colombia, Chile and Mexico as special allies simply because they accept International



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A shorter version of this story, titled "The New 'Community' in America's Backyard," appeared in In These Times' May 2011 issue.