

U.S. Policy Toward Latin America: Is Mild the New Bold?

Written by Gregory Weeks

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GREGORY WEEKS, JUL 1 2008

In May 2008, U.S. Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama released a set of prescriptions for U.S. policy toward Latin America.¹ Senator Obama has no Latin America-related experience, and so we would not expect either profundity or much challenge to the status quo. However, his proposals sparked a debate that sums up the depths to which the U.S.-Latin American relationship under the Bush Administration has fallen. After years of discord, it is striking that failed policies are not questioned more closely. Instead, divergence from conventional wisdom still creates a political uproar. In two areas in particular—free trade and diplomacy—Obama outlines policy prescriptions that are bold because of that divergence, even though in objective terms they are actually quite mild.

For Obama, free trade is not a central priority and he questions prevailing policy consensus. Previous presidents from both parties certainly believed that free market principles, of which free trade is a prominent example, deserved a central role in U.S. policy. The Bush administration, however, has taken the principle and made it a mantra. Market reforms promise not only prosperity, but also democracy. As Brian Loveman has written, “‘market-democracy’ entered the lexicon seamlessly, as if political theorists had long taken it for granted that democracy and a particular version of capitalism were part of the same political package.”²

For example, in March 2008 the U.S. Trade Representative went so far as to claim that failing to ratify a free trade agreement with Colombia would be “the single most destabilizing factor in Latin America today.”³ The administration places free trade ahead of drug trafficking, human smuggling, gang violence, police brutality, or any other threat facing Latin America. As a result, governments in the region are judged in large part according to whether they accept that principle.

Yet so many presidential elections in Latin America over the past decade demonstrate clearly that many Latin Americans are wary of the market mantra. This does not mean they reject capitalism or even free trade per se, but rather reflects the widespread belief that the state has a constructive role—the degree varies widely—to play in economic development. From this perspective, free trade is an option, but one that may or may not be appropriate in a particular context. In Brazil, for example, Lula is seeking new trading partners and new markets, with a focus on free trade (especially with Arab countries) that does not include the United States.⁴

These new governments, the most recent of which are in Guatemala and Paraguay, are in part the consequence of poorly conceived policies pushed in the past. Discontent has simmered as U.S. policy makers have ignored changing political and economic realities on the ground. Continuing to invoke free trade and market reforms as cure-alls will surely result in the election of more skeptical Latin American leaders. Nonetheless, the reaction in the United States to candidates Obama and Hillary Clinton questioning free trade show how much the mantra has been internalized.

Next, Obama advocates for diplomacy, which in the Latin American context refers primarily to dialogue with the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. That the two countries are viewed in tandem also reveals the inability to distinguish between democratically elected governments and unelected dictatorships (in fact, in a Democratic Party presidential debate both were even lumped in together with North Korea). In the Venezuelan case, the Bush

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administration's periodic confrontations with Hugo Chávez (e.g. former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld comparing his rise to power to Hitler's) has damaged U.S. credibility, bolstered his popularity, and helped him continue to win elections. It is worth considering precisely how open confrontation has been a more optimal strategy than dialogue.

In the case of Cuba, Obama calls only for the easing of travel and remittance restrictions—not to an end to the embargo itself—and talks with the Castro regime. Yet for this seemingly mild position, he has been roundly criticized, with John McCain arguing that such a shift would send the “worst possible signal” to the Cuban government that it need not change in order to receive the blessings of the United States government.⁵ Left unanswered, of course, is the question of exactly how the policies of the past 49 years have sent more effective signals.

Yet with regard to Cuba, scratching the surface demonstrates that amongst those who care the most about U.S.-Cuba policy, Obama's position is viewed not only as moderate but also desirable. For example, the Cuban American National Foundation, long the bastion of hardline policies, received his message warmly.⁶ More broadly, in 2007 an Ipsos-Public Affairs poll showed 62 percent of respondent in the U.S. supported re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba.⁷ In short, only a vocal minority with political clout believes that dialogue will somehow strengthen Raúl Castro.

In sum, U.S. policy toward Latin America has been held hostage to an inflexible set of doctrines that, with the help of a relatively uncritical U.S. press and constant repetition, are viewed by too many politicians as truths, even though they are often counterproductive. At times Obama himself is also guilty of this, since he supports the right of one country to bomb another: “we will support Colombia's right to strike terrorists who seek safe-haven across its borders.” The bombing was lauded in the United States but criticized everywhere else, and represented a clear violation of the charter of the Organization of American States. Following Obama's logic, Mexico would be justified in bombing the United States to fight violent drug traffickers.

There is, in fact, no guarantee that an Obama presidency would necessarily entail a major shift in U.S.-Latin American relations, especially since presidents have always focused their attention elsewhere, in spite of what may be said on the campaign trail about being good neighbors. In addition, any president faces powerful domestic constituencies hoping to influence policy. We can safely conclude, however, that the United States' relationship with Latin America has reached a nadir from which we absolutely must rise. Whether policies are truly bold, or merely mild, simply pursuing options that take Latin American realities into account would be a welcome change.

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1 http://obama.3cdn.net/f579b3802a3d35c8d5_9aymvyqpo.pdf

2 Brian Loveman, “U.S. Security Policies in Latin America and the Andean Region, 1990-2006.” In Brian Loveman (ed.). *Addicted to Failure: U.S. Security Policy in Latin America and the Andean Region* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006): 5

3 <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/03/26/susan-schwab-on-the-colombian-trade-deal.html>

4 <http://www.brazzilmag.com/content/view/9469/1/>

5 <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/05/20/mccain-stays-tough-on-cuba-says-obama-would-go-easy/>

6 <http://www2.tbo.com/content/2008/may/27/me-candidates-chart-cuba-positions/>

7 <http://www.pollingreport.com/cuba.htm>

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