

Prepared Remarks of Sarah Stephens  
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Thank you, José, for that generous introduction.

Thanks to all of you for braving this weather and coming out today to participate.

And I also want to recognize all of you at OU –the faculty, staff, and students – who worked so hard to make this 9<sup>th</sup> OLAC conference possible.

It's great for me to be here and let me tell you why.

I am not a Latin America scholar. I got into this work in the early 1980s volunteering with an organization called El Rescate in Los Angeles, where I lived at the time, helping refugees who had fled the civil war in El Salvador and Guatemala.

We began taking these refugees to Washington D.C. where we tried to explain why we needed to stop the war, and change the U.S. policies that were driving it.

We then took policy makers from Congress, and celebrities from Los Angeles, to El Salvador, to try and bring greater attention to the war, and the impact it had on the people of El Salvador and on the region more broadly.

This model, of bringing policy makers to the region, so they can see for themselves the impact of U.S. policy, and hear directly from the affected people how those policies should change, continues to shape the work I do today.

My organization, the Center for Democracy in the Americas, has taken close to fifty research delegations mostly to Cuba, but also to Venezuela, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, and Chile since I moved to Washington in 2001.

We take these delegations because our policy makers don't know a lot about Latin America. It's hard to get them to make the region a priority. So these trips can have a real impact.

When José invited me to come here, and told me that this program was celebrating its fortieth anniversary, I really wanted to meet you all and learn more.

And when I looked through the program and saw some of the things you study-- gender rights and human rights, language and literature, migration and music, stock markets and drug markets – I was very glad that I did.

You are doing what I wish more people in Washington did – you’ve made the region and understanding the strength and diversity of the Americas a real priority.

That frames what I wanted to talk with you about this afternoon.

I believe that those of us who care about the region have a special responsibility to help this country shape our policy toward Latin America and get it right.

Our policy makers have not moved us in the right direction.

I want to share my observations about this, and talk about what I have experienced in my work on Honduras and Cuba. And then I want to close with some recommendations about how our policies can be improved.

This is my thesis: That our government cannot be a good neighbor to the region or an effective advocate for its own interests unless it understands the changing political realities in Latin America and in the United States.

Or put another way, it must acknowledge how much the region has changed, and how the arc of American policy and American politics take us further and further away from how the region has evolved.

Standing still is not an option. Unless we start acting differently, Latin America will continue to pull away from us, and some here at home will keep pulling us back into the kind of Cold War thinking and policies that dominated our approach during the Reagan and Bush eras.

President Obama’s election was a transformative event for our country, and offered the prospects for existential change in our relationship with the region.

He succeeded an administration that demonized leaders it could not depose, that railed against developments it could not control, that pursued policies irrelevant to the lives and aspirations of the people in the region.

So relieved were Latin Americans when George W. Bush left office, that America’s image in the Western Hemisphere leapt by double digits in virtually every nation where the Pew Global Survey polled.

And, although he began his term in office with great promise, by the end of last year, conventional leadership, as one scholar wrote, was “as unwelcome in the person of Barack Obama as in George W. Bush.”

During 2009, Obama’s actions were “business as usual,” hardly a departure from the *status quo* he inherited, and reflected a stale, uninformed vision of the region.

Burdened by two wars and a global economic crisis, it is clear, even understandable, that his priorities were focused elsewhere. More troubling, however, his politics underestimated his domestic opponents, their clear Cold War narrative, their ceaseless desire to oppose his every step.

The great expectations created by his election— unrealistic as they may have been —have since been replaced by disappointment and disillusion, most sharply for me considering events in Honduras and Cuba, but more broadly in the region at large.

I still believe Obama can meet his promise and transform U.S. policy. But only if — and this is a big if — he gets information, support, and yes, at times, pressure from those of us who focus on the region.

There are five trends which I believe ought to define how we approach Latin America today.

**First**, Latin America is now a global intersection of interests — from China and Russia to Iran and others; it is no longer our backyard and will never be again.

This lesson has been hammered home to me in dozens and dozens of research trips to the region since 2001.

I will never forget walking the streets of hurricane-ravaged Cuba in 2008, when George Bush refused to relax the embargo so Cuba could purchase materials for reconstruction, and seeing that void filled by Russia, China, the EU, Mexico, and Brazil, by the donation of \$1 million dollars from tiny Trinidad and Tobago, by Venezuela which sent aid packages of kitchen utensils deep into Cuba's interior.

Nor will I forget meeting the mayor of a rural town in Venezuela's Lara State, who had visited Tehran twice, who had constituents in China learning how to run an assembly plant, who had signed development deals with North Korea and Libya, Colombia and China, Bolivia and Belarus.

Despite U.S. concerns about some of these countries, increased cooperation has resulted in economic opportunities for the mayor's constituents.

And just last weekend, when I was in Aragua, Venezuela, I toured an agricultural coop with greenhouses financed by Iran and with tractors purchased from Belarus. The humble workers it employs hear U.S. criticism of Venezuela's economic and political relations with these countries as threats against their livelihood.

Major global powers are into Latin America in a big way.

Russia, which abandoned Cuba after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, has returned and now calls the island the key to its relationship to all of Latin America.

China released a white paper nearly two years ago that proposed cooperation with Latin America on matters from debt reduction to customs and tourism and promised aid without attaching any political conditions.

With our empty pockets and deep ambivalence about our own role in the region, how can we even compete with China's wealth and ambitions?

**Second**, the dynamics of Latin America have changed greatly; something U.S. policy makers do not understand. After years of rising poverty, economic marginalization and social exclusion, many countries are experimenting with new forms of democracy and the region as a whole is examining increased forms of integration.

Amendments and rewritings of constitutions have been undertaken or are being considered across the region, from Colombia and the Dominican Republic to Ecuador and Bolivia.

These attempts at alternative forms of democracy should not all be written off as Venezuela-funded initiatives to spread the Bolivarian Revolution.

The nations of the region are increasingly looking to domestic processes, regional forums and cooperation with neighbors to solve their problems.

Rather than viewing increased regional cooperation on social, economic and political fronts as a risk to our interests, we should see it as it is: an attempt to diversify markets, create more equitable societies and move away from decades of failed models that depended on bilateral cooperation with the United States to address economic and security needs.

**Third**, although we talk of partnership, our actions speak louder and differently.

We appear unable to bear in mind the history of U.S. involvement or to comprehend the region's sense of grievance for what came before.

Consider, for example, what happened when President Obama attended the Summit of the Americas meeting, and he received the gift of "Open Veins of Latin America," by Eduardo Galeano from Hugo Chavez.

What people remember about that is Obama's affability, his welcoming manner toward President Chavez. But what so many missed was the larger point – Chavez gave him that book as a tangible expression of how many Latin Americans view our country, and why the region's sovereignty and independence matters so deeply to them.

This is what I mean.

Some scholars call our failure to consult the region about our base agreement with Colombia the biggest diplomatic blunder of Obama's year in office.

Allies like Chile and Brazil don't want to read about the Colombia base agreement in their morning newspapers, resent our failure to consult them, and don't want their region inflamed by fears of U.S. military intervention.

They don't want to be warned by Secretary Clinton not to "flirt" with Iran. They don't want to be told who to approve as Secretary General of the OAS. They don't see the hidden hand of Hugo Chavez behind every crisis in the region.

They are tired, as Brazil's foreign minister said last year, of Washington only caring about Latin America as a terrain for the war on drugs.

They don't want the U.S. influencing the outcomes of domestic elections. They will no longer fall in line behind our outdated policy of isolating Cuba. And when we insist on these things, we appear irrelevant and we erode even further the good will earned by Obama's election.

**Fourth**, incremental policy changes simply miss the point.

In his first year, the President did take some welcomed, even important steps – starting to close Guantanamo, restoring family travel to Cuba, calling for partnerships at the Summit of the Americas – but by the end of the year, we all knew they were mailing it in.

Their attention, as I said a moment ago, was often pointed elsewhere. At times, their policies were ad hoc, and a step behind events.

Much of what the administration said and did toward Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela seemed unchanged from what the Bush administration had said and done before.

However, does being low on the priority list constitute an excuse for nearly absolute continuity in our policy towards the region? We need a departure from what has come before.

**Fifth**, once Obama's actions and inactions created a void, his opponents were happy to fill it.

You know who they are. They support strict sanctions on Cuba, they're preoccupied with Venezuela, and they want a strong military hand guiding the war on drugs and other strategic interests. They have money, an echo chamber, a clear narrative connecting Latin America to a broader national security message, and they have no shame.

All of these characteristics were on full display as we did our work on Honduras.

It wasn't until I visited Honduras and met with leaders of the de facto government that I fully understood how this coup was rooted in a larger vision of the actors' role in history.

They convinced themselves that President Zelaya was opening the door in Honduras to all they feared about the Bolivarian revolution; they had to act; they weren't going to give up or give in

just because “the gringos” took their visas away. They weren’t just saving Honduras, they were saving Latin America.

Their fervor was matched by their cheering section in Washington; well-organized, well-funded, and totally on-message. What happened in Honduras, they argued, wasn’t a coup; it was a constitutional exercise of power to stop Mel Zelaya from delivering Honduras into the hands of Hugo Chavez.

With at least \$600,000 in lobbyist and PR help behind them, the coup’s supporters in Washington then challenged the administration to separate itself from the unified stand of the region against the coup. And they played hardball; they held hostage skilled and honorable diplomats, Arturo Valenzuela and Tom Shannon, while they tried to force Obama to drop his insistence that Mel Zelaya be reinstated in his office, and they didn’t stop until they got their way.

In the end, to get his Assistant Secretary for Latin America and his Ambassador to Brazil approved, the President had to abandon the goals, and accept the results of presidential elections in Honduras that could not be free and fair but which allowed the de facto government to erase the stain of the coup.

This pragmatic but utterly short-term thinking exacted a terrible price for Hondurans, their democracy, and our credibility in the region.

What we didn’t do was to stand strongly with the region or back up our devotion to democratic principles with the strongest practical use of U.S. diplomatic or economic pressure.

Honduras has still not recovered. I had the privilege of traveling there twice during the fall – with a Carter Center Delegation and later with Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky. And the violations of human rights, political murder, violence against women, and a tattered democratic order, which we observed last October and November, remain features of Honduran life today.

The Hondurans are still behaving as if there are not bilateral or regional consequences for their attacks on civil liberties, human rights and rule of law, in part because we took the pressure off.

President Obama complained about the critics of his Honduras policy who said the U.S. should be working harder to restore President Zelaya. “They can’t have it both ways,” he said, “The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we’re always intervening and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America.”

It’s hard to argue that we were not already intervening, when we operate a military base on Honduran soil, share strong ties with the military, and our free trade agreement with Central America so profoundly shapes the Honduran economy.

More to the point, the President misread history. What made this situation unique was that America was not alone; the region had come together and hoped for strong and consistent diplomacy, but its hopes were dashed.

Tim Padgett of Time Magazine captured well the domestic political stakes of the fight over Honduras. “As he ends his first year in office,” he wrote, “Obama seems to have ceded his Latin America strategy to the right-wing cold warriors whose thinking – including the idea that coups are still acceptable means of regime change – is no more equipped to help bring the region into the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the ideology of left-wing Marxism is.”

Like Honduras, I believe the President’s policy toward Cuba reflects both a failure of policy imagination and political courage.

It’s not that his values are wrong. Democracy and human rights are the right goals. We were reminded of this just two days ago when we heard the sad news from Cuba that Orlando Zapata Tamayo’s hunger strike ended in his death in a Cuban prison.

This debate is not about whether we like the Cuban government. But we know after five decades of harsh reality, that its political and economic systems haven’t bent or budged one bit after years of embargo and diplomatic isolation.

Our sanctions have given Cuba’s government a justification for limits on expression and dissent and an excuse for the problems it faces from its exhausted economy.

The policy has backfired diplomatically; it has left us terribly isolated in the region, and exposed us to global condemnation in the U.N. for maintaining the embargo on the island.

Cuba’s leading dissident blogger, Yoani Sanchez, calls U.S. policy a blunder. Defenders of human rights in this country – the Catholic Bishops, the AFL-CIO, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House – all think engagement with Cuba would better reflect and promote our interests in democracy and human rights.

Public opinion surveys show broad majorities in the United States for ending the travel ban and lifting the embargo, and now among Miami Cubans, more than sixty percent of respondents think the right to travel to the island should belong to everyone of us.

To the right of this consensus stands President Obama.

The President has tinkered at the edges of Cuba policy, but he has adopted the same ineffective approach that has gotten us no place in fifty years. This policy, “conditionality,” requires Cuba, as Dr. Julia Sweig likes to say, to commit political suicide in order for the U.S. to lift the embargo.

The President has said on multiple occasions that he will not loosen restrictions on Cuba further, unless his actions are met by political changes in Cuba, starting with the release of all political prisoners.

Nobody, except apparently some people working in the White House, believes this will happen.

Capitulation to the United States is not in Cuba's DNA. I can tell you from asking this question on dozens of trips to the island; there is a consensus among Cubans and outside observers that external pressure cannot work to force internal change.

A one Cuban economist told us: Here, there is extreme sensitivity to the way we define ourselves. Think of Cuban history, forget the Soviets, it is about 500 years of domination. Even if we are wrong, we know from Cuban history that someone has always been telling us what to do. Every Cuban politician has to define himself in light of that history. We are extremely sensitive to the perception of pressure.

As I have heard diplomats at Cuba's Foreign Ministry like Josefina Vidal tell Members of Congress countless times, [quote] "This is non-negotiable. We are going to decide for ourselves what kind of system we have. In no case, we would sit down with the U.S. to make changes in our political system."

Obama has preserved the Cold War essence of our Cuba policy, just like every president since Eisenhower and has nothing to show for it.

It makes us look weak, because we keep telling Cuba to do something it will never do.

More important, Obama knows better. I've heard him say it.

Listen to his words spoken last year from a place of honor in the Turkish Parliament.

At the end of World War I, Turkey could have succumbed to the foreign powers that were trying to claim its territory, or sought to restore an ancient empire. But Turkey chose a different future. You freed yourself from foreign control, and you founded a republic that commands the respect of the United States and the wider world.

And there is a simple truth to this story: Turkey's democracy is your own achievement. It was not forced upon you by any outside power, nor did it come without struggle and sacrifice. Turkey draws strength from both the successes of the past, and from the efforts of each generation of Turks that makes new progress for your people.

Now, if President Obama applied the same framework to our Cuba policy, wouldn't he end the embargo, cease funding U.S. AID programs geared toward regime change, acknowledge Cuba's journey from domination by foreign powers, and entrust Cuba's political future to the goals and aspirations of Cuba's people?

Those would be the actions of a political leader who should symbolize a new way of doing business in the region and take us in an entirely different direction.

Let me close with some recommendations for what that new direction should look like for the President and our policy toward the region as a whole.

Obama should return to where he began. He started by telling Latin Americans that the U.S. wants to be their partner and respects the sovereignty of the region. He should listen to governments who share our goals and end the U.S. obsession with those who don't.

We should be brave and that means encouraging – not resisting - changes in governance that increase participation and provide material progress for the region's poor, because addressing poverty, inequality, and exclusion will connect to almost every other problem that Latin America has.

We should be working on bilateral relationships with countries like El Salvador, trying to do things in new ways, bringing along entire populations and not just elites, creating new models and examples that address the new, changed region.

We should build on an inspired first reaction to the crisis in Haiti, telling the American people that we're there for the long term, and proving to the people of Haiti that we mean it.

We should stop waiting for Cuba to make gestures and we should take these steps because they are in our national interest and will help change the conversation in the region.

With our regional partners, we should keep the pressure on Honduras until violations of human rights and the democratic order end, and a civil dialogue about constitutional reform begins.

It would send a powerful signal if President Obama were to meet with the leaders of UNASUR, as they have requested, to explain the details of the base agreement with Colombia.

Finally, in making these decisions, the President should stand up against the neo-conservatives and say that we will have one policy toward Latin America, and it's going to be his.

And then he should tell the Congress, and the country, that a progressive policy for the region is in our country's national interest. That's the missing narrative, and he must give it voice.

I think this is Obama's historic opportunity, one that reflects the changing nature both of the region and our national identity.

Latin American studies started as a discipline 40 years ago at this university. Think for a moment of where our country will be 40 years from now.

By 2050, this country will be 30% Latino. Right now, we are the second most populous Spanish speaking country after Mexico.

It is unthinkable for our country to act as if we are disconnected from the actions and arc of Latin America. President Obama has a historical imperative to get it right. This means taking risks and making changes that are big.

If he does take these steps, I believe the President can tap the reservoir of good will created by his election and give his administration and our nation a new start in Latin America. As the people most concerned in our country about our relationships with the region, it is our job to insist that he do so.

That is our responsibility as scholars of and advocates for the people of Latin America.

Thank you again for the honor of this invitation to speak with you.