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"The Obama Administration and Latin America: The First Year"

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The Obama administration and Democratization in Latin America

Thank you. I am honored to be here, on this panel, and to have this chance to offer my perspective this morning.

I want to make one key point that relates to the subject our panel is supposed to discuss. My thesis is this: Our government cannot be an effective advocate for democracy and American interests unless it better 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 pull us back into the kind of Cold War thinking and policies that dominated our approach during the Reagan and Bush eras.

Although he began his term in office with great promise, I don't believe that President Obama or his policies toward the region reflect that understanding.

During 2009, his actions were "business as usual," hardly a departure from the *status quo* he inherited from President Bush, reflecting a stale, uninformed vision of the region.

At home, it is clear that his priorities were focused elsewhere, and 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The great expectations created by his election—unrealistic as they may have been—have since been replaced by disappointment and disillusion, most sharply for me considering events in Honduras and Cuba, but more broadly in the region at large.

But the story doesn't have to end here.

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

There are four 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.

And just this weekend, when I was in Aragua, Venezuela, I toured an agricultural coop with greenhouses financed by Iran and with tractors purchased from Belarus. 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, despite some improvements, we are still addressing the sovereign states of Latin America as if we are their patrons, not their partners.

This is what I mean.

Allies like Chile and Brazil don't want to read about the Colombia base agreement in their morning newspapers, detest 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 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.

Third, 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, understandably, was often pointed elsewhere. At times, their policies were ad hoc, and a step behind events. No one could call Latin America a policy priority for this administration, and much of what it said and did toward Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela seemed unchanged from what the Bush administration had said and done before. We need a departure from what has come before.

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

You know where they stand. They support strict sanctions on Cuba, they're preoccupied with Venezuela, 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.

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 theretwice 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.”

But he 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 21st 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.

Obama 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 Julia Sweig likes to say, to commit political suicide in order for the U.S. to lift the embargo.

But capitulation to the U.S. is not in Cuba’s DNA. 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.”

And while the President takes baby steps and waits in vain for Cuba to make gestures, he is – at the very same time – funding regime change programs in the federal budget that close political spaces in Cuba and which landed a U.S. AID contractor in a Cuban prison late last year for activities that violate Cuban law and would be illegal in the United States.

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. And it is the wrong place for us to be – it offends ordinary Cubans, and it isolates Obama against the majority of Americans, against clear

majorities in the Cuban-American community, against most of Cuba's dissidents, against the Catholic Church, and U.S. economic interests, all of whom want a different policy.

Most of all, in the case of Cuba, as with other places we have mentioned, it sends a depressingly familiar signal about a political leader who should symbolize a new way of doing business in the region and take us in an entirely different direction.

What would that new direction look like?

First, I think Obama should return to where he started. He began 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.

It means 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.

It means transforming our policy toward Cuba. It is simply not acceptable in this era for the United States to be alone in the hemisphere without diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba. Obama should use his executive authority to open Cuba to travel by cultural figures, artists, religious groups and others, and the Administration should endorse legislation in Congress to end the travel ban for all Americans and to sell more food to the Cuban people. We should stop waiting for Cuba to make gestures and take these steps because they are in our national interest and will help change the conversation in the region.

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.

Forty years from now, this country will be 30% Latino. We cannot afford to be 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.