

A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH THE AMERICAS

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BARACK OBAMA SHOULD RENEW THE U.S. COMMITMENT TO THE REST OF THE HEMISPHERE, BASING IT ON ENGAGEMENT, DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION.

By *BILL RICHARDSON*

For the last seven years, U.S. foreign policy has all but ignored Latin America, the region with perhaps the greatest impact on the daily lives of Americans. For starters, Hispanics now represent America's biggest ethnic bloc — and, perhaps, the one most courted by both major political parties.

Despite Washington's neglect, the region has not stood still, growing by 5 percent per year on average, initiating dozens of regional trade agreements, and luring \$125 billion in foreign domestic investment from countries like India and China last year alone.

In terms of bilateral trade, Mexico is the third most important source of oil for the U.S. The United States exports \$225 billion worth of goods to Latin America each year, four times more than it sends to China. Although Central and South American countries have started to turn elsewhere for investment and trading partners, the United States remains the number-one market for Latin American exporters. And the \$60 billion in annual remittances that flow back to the region from the U.S. still constitute a vital source of income for millions of people.

Latin America and the United States also have key mutual interests in working together to fight crime networks and stop narco-trafficking. Law enforcement is essential, but it is not enough. To fight drug trafficking we need to arrest and punish dealers, but we also need to

do more to reduce demand in the United States.

Let's also be mindful that the ties between our nations are far more than economic or political; they are also personal. Should you ever doubt this, walk by the community phone in any small village between the Rio Grande and the Panama Canal on a Sunday night. There you will see lines of mothers and fathers waiting patiently to speak with their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces in the U.S.

I believe that the incoming U.S. administration needs to remember those ties and take bold action — both symbolic and practical — to renew relations with this critical region for America's interests.

A Return to Diplomacy

That process begins with matching American ideals of human rights to our conduct. The prolonged detention of hundreds of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay constitutes not just an affront to America's beliefs, but a shameful symbol for its Latin American neighbors. The United States should stand again for accountability and rule of law, by restoring habeas corpus and joining the International Criminal Court.

Second, America must engage all Latin American countries diplomatically, even unfriendly regimes like Venezuela and Cuba. This does not mean making con-

cessions, but speaking frankly and conducting tough negotiations to strengthen our common interests. In particular, American diplomacy should work to strengthen our ties to Chile, Argentina and Brazil. Each of these nations represents tremendous opportunities for economic, environmental and political partnership.

This new policy would entail a more realistic approach toward Havana, dealing sensibly with economic and personal issues like trade and family visitation. The Bush administration has been imposing severe restrictions on family visits and remittances to Cuba. I strongly oppose these cruel and counterproductive rules; Cuban-Americans should be allowed to visit their families and assist them financially. The Obama administration should be prepared to reassess the trade embargo, in exchange for the Castro regime's releasing all political prisoners and making moves toward democratic freedoms.

More generally, the new administration must recommit to multilateralism, working to strengthen institutions like the United Nations and the Organization for American States. At the U.N., it should support an expanded Security Council that includes a permanent seat for at least one Latin American country. (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Chile would all be logical candidates.) As for the OAS, we must provide both political and financial support for its mission and programs.

Third, the United States needs comprehensive immigration reform that is realistic and humane. We need to strengthen our borders and punish employers who break

the law by hiring undocumented workers. But America must also recognize that we simply can't deport the 12 million people who are already here. Instead, we need a tough, fair path to legalization — not walls, which don't work and are a terrible symbol to the world.

At its root, illegal immigration is an economic problem, driven by the lack of decent jobs for people in their home countries. Until other economies produce well-paying jobs, people will continue to come to the United States. So if we truly want to end illegal immigration, Washington needs to promote equitable development in Latin America.

The New Alliance for Progress

Fourth, the United States needs a New Alliance for Progress. But this should not be a one-sided relationship premised on the expansion of U.S. markets, imposition of a Washington Consensus, or an ideology meant to divide countries into friends and foes. Rather, we need an accord based on the original principles President Kennedy articulated almost 50 years ago:

“To build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom. ... Let us once again transform the American continent into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts, a tribute to the power of the creative energies of free men and women, an example to all the world that liberty and progress walk hand in hand.”

I believe such a new partnership with the Americas is possible. It begins with trade agreements that are both free and fair. Free as they unleash the power of competitive markets to make food and products more affordable to all, and fair as they demand strong and enforceable labor, environmental and human right standards. This is not a “magic bullet” for economic development, but it can and will benefit Latin American and U.S. workers.

This new partnership must do much more to address the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Debt relief for the poorest countries in the region has been a vital and welcome help. The Millennium Development Goals have charted a course out of poverty for the poorest countries in the world, but they don't do enough for Latin America's largely middle-income countries. Closing the region's poverty gap will require addressing both human needs and economic needs.

Human needs mean, for example, that every child must have a nutritious diet. As governor of an American state, it was a revelation that millions of U.S. children

*Bill Richardson has been governor of New Mexico since 2003 and is a past chairman of the Democratic Governors Association. After serving seven terms in the House of Representatives, he became President Bill Clinton's ambassador to the United Nations in 1997 and, the next year, Secretary of Energy. Governor Richardson has served as a diplomatic envoy in various capacities, negotiating the release of hostages, American servicemen and political prisoners in North Korea, Iraq, Sudan and Cuba. In 2006, he was named special envoy for hemispheric affairs by the secretary general of the Organization of American States, with a mandate to “promote dialogue on issues of importance to the region, such as immigration and free trade.” Gov. Richardson is the author of *Between Worlds: The Making of an American Life and Leading by Example: How We Can Inspire an Energy and Security Revolution*, both published in 2007.*

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leave their home each day without food. My state now provides more healthy breakfasts per capita to children living in poverty than any other state in the country. Children cannot learn new skills for tomorrow if they lack food today. It should be a goal of all our nations that no child go hungry, period.

By economic needs, I simply mean that every able man and woman must have the opportunity to earn a paycheck sufficient to meet basic necessities. Here, the creative energies of Latin America are already being put to productive use. Mexico is putting hundreds of thousands of people back to work through public investment projects that will improve transportation and infrastructure and bring additional foreign investment. And Brazil now leads the world in energy independence, using ethanol to supply 40 percent of its fuel.

As a former U.S. Secretary of Energy, I believe efforts to fight climate change can also be an opportunity for innovation. Under the Obama administration, I expect America to move quickly toward a real carbon trading sys-

tem. I hope we also take bold steps to reward countries that make the wise investment of protecting their forests with carbon credits. And it will also be vitally important to share green technology throughout the region so clean energy generation is affordable for all.

In conclusion, the new administration needs to renew a commitment to Latin America based upon engagement, dialogue and cooperation. We need equitable trade agreements, comprehensive immigration reform and a commitment to progress for all.

Having spent part of my childhood in Mexico, and having traveled widely in the region, I understand the complicated dynamics of inter-American relations. My Mexican mother taught me to value and respect Latino culture, just as my American father made me proud to be a citizen of the United States.

I titled my autobiography *Between Worlds* not because we are so far apart, but rather because we are so close. We share a belief in human dignity and democratic freedom. Let us never waver from that faith. ■



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