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Obama and the Americas: Old Hopes, New Risks

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In chapter 1, Abraham Lowenthal provides a judicious overview of the hopes for change in the Americas raised by the advent of the Obama administration in January 2009, despite the complexities of internal bureaucratic politics that hedge in U.S. leadership. He gives four good reasons for keeping alive modest but positive expectations: the importance of Latin America for U.S. policymakers; the existence of a well-grounded set of understandings and agreements among most U.S. analysts, think tanks, and policy experts; an enhanced capacity to discriminate between countries and issues; and a consequent awareness of the need to avoid overreacting to specific local crises.

Old Hopes

As chapter 1 also makes clear, many of those supporting Barack Obama expected that he would act vigorously to repair the damage that his predecessor inflicted on the international standing of the United States. At the time of Obama's inauguration, Latin America offered good opportunities for such demonstrative repositioning. Some fear that the best opportunity for a fresh start may already have been missed, and that the relatively strong continuities observable between late Bush Junior and early Obama foreshadow a deeper inertia. This could generate disappointment and even distrust.

President Obama's initial region-wide popularity put the minority of "anti-Washington" governments of Latin America in a defensive position. They might have liked nothing better than to assert that "nothing has

changed," that behind the friendlier façade the United States is still pursuing the same old interests and unilateral practices. The Colombian bases issue and the Honduran constitutional interruption provided grist to that mill. On this view, if there is no overarching policy framework with high visibility executive leadership and support to reshape hemispheric relations, there may be policy fragmentation, a reactive management of crises, and a loss of momentum necessary for cumulative progress. And if U.S. allies develop the impression that Washington lacks a consistent long-term strategy and that they are mostly on their own, it may become difficult to sustain multilateral cooperation and goodwill.

A year and a half into Obama's first term both assessments seem equally plausible: there is still scope for the administration's new team of Latin American officeholders (finally confirmed after a year's delay) to take charge and actively promote the first, more positive, alternative; but it is also possible to detect the early stages of what could grow into a larger estrangement between Washington and its many hemispheric neighbors.

This volume concludes somewhat on the more positive side, in the belief that the Western Hemisphere remains a favorable neighborhood for a repositioned United States and may even provide a relatively "easy" opportunity for it to regain international credibility. But ensuring this requires more innovative thinking, sustained attention, a willingness on the part of the United States to treat its regional partners as equals, and more systematic consultation with them on how best to deal with the challenges the hemisphere faces. This in turn calls for well-prepared and intelligently designed proactive rather than reactive policies, and the ability to differentiate countries and issues, avoiding the old us-versus-them logic that colored the Axis of Evil and War on Terror perspectives.

Early on in the new administration several unforeseen developments created difficulties that—perhaps for very understandable reasons—were not as well handled as they might have been. The Colombia bases agreement and the Honduran constitutional standoff initially caught the administration off balance and highlighted some disconnect between presidential rhetoric and practical performance. One can imagine the ferocity of external and domestic criticisms had the same policy responses been adopted by the Bush administration. This thought puts in focus both the degree of goodwill initially generated by the change of president and the extent to which that fund of goodwill was drawn on during the first eighteen months of Obama's tenure. Other challenging issues foreseeable in the near future include a possible intensification of regional tensions around various "intermestic" issues

such as immigration policy and drug trafficking (issues concerning, but by no means confined to, Mexico) and perhaps also frictions with Brazil on various international issues, notably with regard to sanctions against Iran. Five regional snapshots will amply illustrate the diverse challenges involved.

Cuba

The Obama administration inherited long-standing policies ostensibly directed toward promoting a democratic transition in a post-Castro Cuba, which were codified by the U.S. Congress with the 1996 Helms-Burton Law and 2000 Cuban Democracy Act. The prior administration had tightened bilateral sanctions further and appointed a State Department "transition" coordinator. But that was before Fidel Castro's illness, and the smooth transfer of power to his brother.

January 2009 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. It is now generally believed (even among Cuban Americans) that unilateral U.S. sanctions have failed to encourage democratization in Cuba. A multilateral soft-power approach is more likely to help Cubans liberalize and eventually democratize. Listening to the pro-engagement views of Washington's democratic partners (Canada and the European Union, as well as Brazil and Mexico) would also boost U.S. credibility in the region and beyond.

Despite a mildly positive beginning, the ancient standoff between Havana and Washington remains essentially unchanged, as detailed by Dan Erikson in chapter 7. President Obama lifted some Bush-era restrictions on travel and remittances by Cuban Americans, authorized new U.S. investments in telecommunications in Cuba, and began negotiations to restore normal postal communications. But the travel ban on normal U.S. visits to the island remains in place, and licenses for specialized categories of travel continue in short supply. And on the Cuban side, the Castro brothers remain unbending in their commitment to an inflexible and besieged "revolutionary" model. By April 2010 mutual recriminations reached a new peak as the regime clamped down in reaction to economic distress, international censure, and domestic protest by the opposition group known as Damas de Blanco.

From a Latin American perspective, this relapse could be viewed as a missed opportunity. Obama probably did not wish to pay a domestic political price for being more open-handed toward Cuba, and a bipartisan group in Congress has blocked legislation to liberalize trade and travel. But his advisers may have underestimated the external political capital to be gained from making a clean break with Washington's unilateralist past on this front.

Any early bold initiative would have been more likely to produce a worthwhile response in Havana than would comparable gestures toward Moscow and Tehran. And if at the outset the Cuban leadership had failed to respond to a clearly innovative overture, it might have lost its international status as a "David" and faced incomprehension from its own people and regionally.

In the event, the Cuban regime still enjoys a significant degree of legitimacy within the United Nations, where U.S. unilateral sanctions are repeatedly condemned by an overwhelming majority. Even in the Organization of American States (OAS), the June 2009 meeting manifested a united disposition to readmit the Cubans (not that Havana shows any inclination to return). Such supportive international and regional responses are also based on the hope that persuasion may elicit a better response than U.S. intimidation. Furthermore, although the human rights record of the regime is negative, Cuba has a clear record of compliance with its international obligations on migration and narcotics, at least since the end of the cold war.

The U.S.-run detainee camp at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, a legal black hole of key concern to the international community, is one recent factor explaining why Washington's long-standing condemnation of the regime has lacked regional and international resonance. The Obama administration stated its intention to close the detention facility, in apparent recognition of the fact that maintaining it undermines Washington's credibility as a defender of the rule of law and promoter of democracy. However, this promise remains disappointingly unfulfilled.

In mid-2010 Cuba certainly still presents Obama with the same old policy dilemma: the Cuban Communist Party seems likely to remain in a dominant position for the indefinite future, and it is not a "reform communist" institution that can evolve into one among various electoral contenders. The harsh treatment meted out to peaceful dissidents was dramatized in February 2010 with the death in custody after a long hunger strike of Orlando Zapata, an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. This was the worst incident since 1972, and once again it left Washington posturing on the sidelines, while the Vatican and the Catholic Church, for example, proved capable of more constructive mediation.

On a longer view, there remains scope for the new administration to work with allies in the hemisphere and beyond to give Havana further incentives to liberalize. Cooperation with the European Union could be fruitful. EU member states have been divided between punitive action and a "critical dialogue" with Cuba, as supported by Spain in particular, but the European Commission reached a new cooperation agreement with Havana in October

2008. A trilateral dialogue between the United States, the European Union, and Latin America on how to approach the Cuba issue could establish shared responsibility to carefully nurture liberalization and even democratization tendencies within Cuba. But President Obama declined Spain's invitation to the most recent EU-Latin America summit in Madrid. Washington remains unimaginative and unconstructive on this issue. It still enforces unilateral sanctions that aggravate the bad economic situation on the island, not only causing great suffering to ordinary Cubans but also providing the regime with an easy alibi for its failings.

Haiti

In 2004 President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been democratically elected but had lost domestic and international political legitimacy, was forced from office. An interim government invited the United Nations to send a "stabilization mission," which the Security Council charged with demobilizing armed groups, restructuring and reforming the Haitian police, and fostering institutional development, national dialogue, and reconciliation.

Six years after the deployment of multinational forces by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), there was still no agreed date for its withdrawal, and its mandate was being renewed on a short-term basis. This was apparently a minor priority on the Washington scale of foreign policy concerns, notwithstanding the deep historic U.S. involvement in Haitian affairs. Then in January 2010 the main urban center of the republic was completely devastated by an earthquake of exceptional severity. The death toll has exceeded 230,000, or 2½ percent of the total population, and much of the country's precarious physical infrastructure, the economy, and public administration has virtually collapsed.

This overwhelming natural disaster makes a compelling case for a fresh start. Haiti in 2010 is a laboratory of "state failure" unrelated to conflict or a security threat, if there ever was one: it provides the international community with a unique opportunity to demonstrate how well it can discharge its commitment to humanitarian assistance and reconstruction. If the Obama administration could establish common ground with the rest of the international community to promote reconstruction and economic recovery with a focus on social goals, this would set a significant regional and international example of the new approach it has promised.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, all attention focused on the most urgent relief operations, with 13,000 U.S. Marines controlling the

airport and port. In practice, this meant they were overseeing the international community's humanitarian response (although in principle this remains a UN-directed responsibility, to be carried out in concordance with what is left of the Haitian government). Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the convening of (overdue) congressional elections in order to reestablish a legitimate Haitian counterpart that the international community can work with, but the cost, duration, and mandate of the prospective UN reconstruction effort remain highly opaque.

Failure to cope with the reconstruction challenges would return to haunt the Obama administration, since U.S. involvement is so central. Thus it is a major U.S. interest this time, in contrast to earlier episodes of international suspension of Haitian sovereignty, that a coherent, coordinated, and long-term strategy for national recovery be accomplished. This implies a sustained and effective multilateral commitment (much of the financial support is likely to come from the European Union and the rest of the Americas, including Canada, rather than just the United States). It also requires the participation of a substantial cohort of educated and locally embedded reconstruction workers.

The Haitian diasporas in Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean may well be the best places to provide much of this human response, but tapping their potential calls for a far-reaching reversal of current aid practices that tend to marginalize them. (At the time of writing, Washington is reportedly hesitating over whether to grant temporary protected status to 55,000 Haitian immigrants, many of whom could be helped to contribute financial and human resources to national reconstruction).

If Washington wants to demonstrate that it knows how to help rectify state failure elsewhere, then this is a prime site to show what it can do. Like other failed states, at the very least Haiti needs a generational commitment to reform, the results of which will take years to become visible. Large amounts of resources have already been channeled in this direction, with former president Bill Clinton taking on a personal role as Obama's special envoy, and with the secretary of state providing top-level direction to Washington's Haiti strategy, but a very long-term and multilateral approach will be needed if the legacy of past failures is to be overcome. Beyond immediate disaster relief, the sovereignty of the Haitian nation and the viability of its economy both require the creation of solid institutions, not just courts and police forces, but the kind of educational facilities that will allow Haiti's youngest citizens to develop the capabilities their country needs. This humanitarian tragedy is not easy to fit into any overarching U.S. foreign policy narrative,

but there is a lot of moral capital at stake in how well the Obama administration responds to it over the longer run.

The ALBA Challenge

Aggressive high rhetoric and conflict with Hugo Chávez became a staple feature of relations between the United States and Latin America under the Bush administration. The election of President Obama led Chávez at first to tone down his attacks on the United States, but Venezuela's efforts to win over new state allies have persisted, and the persuasive powers of a discourse of "anti-imperialism" and "social justice" are yet to be exhausted.

Many, especially in the United States, have concluded that Venezuela's current populist nationalism presents the gravest threat to democracy in the hemisphere. But in a region where democracy has been accompanied by enduring social and political exclusion and vulnerability to the global financial economy, support for this variant of populism also reflects the failures of the Washington Consensus model. The appeal of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) derives not so much from ideological persuasiveness or from the belief that it represents a true "alternative" as it does from its attention to those excluded from enjoying true democratic rights and economic benefits, and from the sense that the United States treats its southern neighbors not as equals but rather with disrespect and double standards.

The best U.S. response to such sentiments is to proffer to the region's governments and citizens a convincing message about Washington's enduring interest in democracy and development, and concerted and coherent policies to match. It is particularly important that the United States assist the smaller, weaker, and more impoverished states that are tempted to join ALBA because of the economic benefits it extends in exchange for a willingness to play the "anti-imperialist" card. It is now generally agreed that the decades-long embargo against Cuba did more to strengthen the Castro regime—providing it with the legitimacy that comes from resisting external hostility—than to weaken it. In much the same way, the ALBA alternative is more likely to become just that—an alternative—to the degree that Washington reacts to crises in the region with a divisive and intrusive unilateral policy.

Alone, ALBA countries can perhaps do little, but as the issues of climate change and Iran sanctions illustrate, they may sometimes secure a broader hearing. Indeed, if the ALBA group concludes that confrontation with Washington is the best card to play, its collective recalcitrance may hamper future negotiations on a variety of issues of vital interest to the United States.

The Copenhagen summit of December 2009 provides one illustration of how neglected regional tensions can stand in the way of Washington's global goals. The summit accord was generally regarded as a disappointment, if not a marked failure for the environment and international cooperation in addressing shared problems, two priorities of the Obama administration. Among the six countries rejecting even the watered-down accord were three ALBA countries—Bolivia, Cuba, and Venezuela—and they did so on the grounds that President Obama had hijacked the negotiations and shifted the burden of adjustment to the developing world.

Climate change is not the only issue on which ALBA could gain a wider hearing within Latin America and beyond. Health care and popular education are also strong suits for them. The Obama administration would be ill advised to continue us-versus-them tactics that mainly serve to cement their solidarity. Each member of that group has its own separate interests and grievances: on some issues they may be implacable and united, but on others they may be divided. Thus a more creative regional strategy might secure their neutrality or even partial cooperation. Washington has begun showing signs of a more sophisticated approach. It should handle this group by seeking common ground where possible and dealing with each challenge on its merits. There is much to be gained by a friendlier approach. These countries could contribute to an effective regional capacity for disaster relief (in the face of episodes such as the Chilean and Haitian earthquakes; Cuba has 1,600 health care workers on the ground in Haiti, for example, many of them of Haitian origin). Other environmental and developmental issues could be productively tackled in the same spirit. Similar considerations might even apply to counternarcotics operations and if so might eventually extend as far as some counterinsurgency issues.

On questions such as international arbitration over investment disputes or guarantees of free speech and media freedom, however, Washington will probably have no choice but to oppose the group's ideas and practices. The Chávez regime, in particular, seems set on a course of both political and economic radicalization that is only likely to produce more conflict and distrust, without much prospect of reaching any stable settlement. In this respect, Venezuela is more problematic than, say, Bolivia or Ecuador. But the hardest and potentially most dangerous sources of disagreement concern ALBA's strong opposition to U.S. "interventionism" in the region and Washington's interpretation of regional security imperatives. This is where clashes between Caracas and Washington are hardest to reconcile.

Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's former foreign secretary, has argued that what Latin American radicals want from Obama is not so much "respect"

as "repentance," and he therefore advocates escalation against the pretensions of ALBA. But a cool assessment suggests that outright confrontation is far from inevitable. By working with the grain of opinion in the region, the Obama administration still has scope to shift the profile of the U.S. presence in Haiti, Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere toward more emphasis on multilateral cooperation and the solution of problems through political agreement, downplaying the unilateral and military features that have figured so prominently in recent years. The rapid drawdown of the U.S. military presence in Haiti is illustrative here. Although Bolivia will never countenance the return of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), that does not preclude different sources of international cooperation to combat illegal narcotics gangs, perhaps led by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). While a sovereign Venezuela has every right to obtain its armaments from whatever legitimate source it deems convenient, its neighbors have the same right to demand its nonintervention in their internal affairs. And finally, even Cuba should be recognized as a state that can be asked to honor its international commitments, and that has provided a considerable margin of stability and even security to the United States in its Caribbean seaways and airspace.

Plan Colombia

The Obama administration seems to have been caught by surprise by the criticism of its decision to negotiate a further ten-year bilateral agreement, which includes U.S. military access to seven Colombian bases to combat drugs and domestic insurgency. Most of the impetus for these negotiations came from the U.S. Defense Department's Southern Command, and it appears that the administration did not prepare an adequate diplomatic strategy to deal with the foreseeable regional backlash.¹

News of the agreement, in August 2009, provided Venezuela's President Chávez with the perfect explanation for his already agreed program of overseas military procurement. It caused unnecessary embarrassment for Brazil—the Obama administration's best prospect for a reliable South American partnership—which had just taken the lead in creating the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), a regional alliance of democratically elected governments charged precisely with handling such issues on a multilateral basis. Many South American commentators felt that this highlighted once more Washington's overreliance on bilateralism to the detriment of mutually respectful dialogue with key regional democratic partners. Although Plan Colombia has built up and professionalized the Colombian armed

forces over the past decade, it has also destabilized the balance of power in the northern Andes, helping to precipitate an arms race with the Venezuelans and provoking the Ecuadorian military into near confrontation with both Colombia and the United States.

The Dominican-led mediation between Colombia and Ecuador, like the Contadora Group experience in Central America in the 1980s, provides good examples of what more credible multilateral partnerships can achieve. A Contadora-style process would allow for the formulation of principles agreeable to all three states to trigger more specific commitments. Any such mutual support would have needed to build confidence between the competing parties, seeking out common ground on matters of controversy between them, promoting reconciliation, and identifying areas of consensus around the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law in this dangerously divided subregion. But that was not the course chosen by the Obama administration, at least in its first year, even though such an approach would have established a useful precedent for tackling regional tensions in other, more problematic contexts.

The furor surrounding the announcement of the U.S.–Colombian bases agreement and related rhetoric about a possible “arms race” in the northern Andes suggest a shift in a very different direction. It is hard to anticipate how far the current conflict might escalate.² But is there an alternative? As with Cuba, the initial hopes raised by Obama’s election elicited some resistance from parts of the Latin American left, but the initiative lay with Washington. Now, by contrast, it could prove much easier for ALBA to revive latent anti-U.S. reflexes. A policy forged through consultation that emphasizes the benefits of peace and stability in Grancolombia as a whole would have recognized that whatever the benefits of a decade-long Plan Colombia, it has done little to curb drug trafficking from there, while so much emphasis on one bilateral military relationship has left many damaging humanitarian, socioeconomic, and diplomatic legacies. A more multilateral, broadly based, and democracy/development-oriented relationship with this subregion could have been launched to tackle those issues. Viewed from this perspective, the way Washington actually handled the Colombia bases can be seen as a missed opportunity.

On the brighter side, the issue may have been blown out of proportion and can perhaps be defused now that Obama’s team is in office and President Alvaro Uribe has bowed to the ban on any further reelection. The smooth and legitimate process by which Uribe’s successor was elected (in a two-round contest) sets a positive example for Colombia’s neighbors to follow.

The Obama administration has guaranteed that U.S. military operations will be restricted to Colombian territory, and Secretary Clinton has reassured her South American counterparts that the extended U.S. presence in Colombia will not become a springboard for invasion or infiltration of third states. She has also sought improved relations with Ecuador, although President Rafael Correa remains adamant that any further military incursions into his territory will be met with force. So the setback of 2009 need not prove insurmountable, provided the right lessons are learned and followed. But sporadic or ad hoc responses would be insufficient to address the policy challenges that face Grancolombia, or indeed the Western Hemisphere as a whole.

Honduras

In response to initial criticisms of U.S. policy toward Honduras following the unconstitutional defenestration of elected President Manuel Zelaya, President Barack Obama commented on the "irony that the people that were complaining about the U.S. interfering in Latin America are now complaining that we aren't interfering enough."³ From a White House standpoint, the sense of being "damned" both ways may seem a fair view of the erratic sequence of Washington's efforts to manage the Honduras crisis between June 2009 and January 2010. Those schooled in the long history of U.S. interventionism in Central America and the Caribbean will recognize the familiarity of this refrain, which also fits a series of earlier Honduran episodes, and indeed does much to explain why the "gunboat diplomacy" of the 1920s gave way to the Good Neighbor Policy of the 1930s. It is important to recognize that the perverse logic of the damned-both-ways interpretation has become entrenched only in a limited subset of small and vulnerable Latin America nations.⁴ The United States is not invited by Latin American opinion to intervene anywhere in South America, or in Mexico, or indeed in Cuba or Venezuela.

Honduras constitutes an unusually clear case of a country in which past relations with the United States generate such expectations. It was widely regarded as essentially a platform for President Ronald Reagan's "contra" war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and it came as a shock to Washington when the government of Honduras joined with its neighbors to support the Esquipulas formula to promote a local isthmian solution to that conflict.

Washington policymakers with insufficient time to attend to all the nuances of Latin American history, and with an urgent need to secure results acceptable to domestic U.S. opinion when a crisis blows up, may find the

damned-both-ways interpretation a convenient shorthand. But, as Kevin Casas so clearly explains in chapter 8, the local history was crucial, and a better understanding of the background might have helped avert what was far from an inevitable setback. Even when U.S. ascendancy was at its height (as during the Alliance for Progress years), "damned both ways" was a dangerous oversimplification. In current conditions, it applies hardly anywhere in the hemisphere.

Admittedly, Honduras serves as an example of how hard it is to make "democracy-promoting" policy choices. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's position was that no quarter should be given to *golpistas*, as this would open an antidemocratic Pandora's Box; but Spain was also right to note that the new elections should be taken into account. In the end, it was a (reasonably) democratic election that brought the confrontation to an end, and a majority of the hemisphere's democratic leaders have since come round to accepting that provisional settlement, although incoming President Porfirio Lobo will remain a contested figure as long as Honduran promises of reconciliation remain unfulfilled. Old hopes that military interruptions would never again be tolerated in the Western Hemisphere have given way to new risks that, one small step at a time, may splinter and erode the region's recent constitutional democratic consensus.

For the United States, the benefits of a democratic neighborhood have been taken for granted and greatly underestimated. Historically, Latin America has not turned to authoritarianism without a corresponding international zeitgeist favoring such political solutions. But the Obama administration will need to work more closely with all its democratic partners, and will need to display more agility than was in evidence in the Honduran case, if it is to regain credibility as an effective friend of democratic stability in the Americas. But there is also scope to improve the functioning of the Organization of American States, and it would be unsatisfactory to try to shift the blame to the OAS for a weakness rooted in U.S. policies.

New Risks

There is broad agreement throughout the subcontinent that local conflicts need to be managed by local actors, and that while international mediation is acceptable, U.S. intervention is either unviable or likely to do more harm than good. Although many policymakers in Washington may view collective regional mediation efforts as ineffective, too slow, or even spineless, the days of "hegemonic presumption" are long since past.⁵

Remember, too, that the Obama administration is in a far less dominant position in the hemisphere than was the Clinton administration only one decade earlier. Even in the 1990s, when the Washington Consensus was at its peak and there seemed to be no alternative political or economic models for Latin America to consider, the regional "convergence" around a unified set of liberal principles was strained and partly artificial.⁶ Since 2001 centrifugal forces have clearly outweighed centripetal ones. The Twin Towers atrocity was quickly followed by the Argentine institutional collapse and default of 2001–02, and by the failed coup against President Chávez. By 2003 both Chile and Mexico had declined to join President Bush's "coalition of the willing" in Iraq.

Shortly thereafter, the decade-long Miami Summit process to establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas was dealt a mortal blow with Congress's nonrenewal of the "fast-track" authority necessary for its ratification. With the (clearly democratic) elections of Evo Morales in Bolivia and of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, the Venezuelan-backed Bolivarian Alternative became a multinational initiative. Finally, the financial crisis of 2008 caused the United States to abandon domestic compliance with the core of the macroeconomic prescriptions it had for so long promoted south of the Rio Grande. As remittances from North America plummeted, an increasing range of Latin American elites came to view the emerging economies of Asia as an apparently successful alternative to the lopsided liberalizations they had undergone during the 1990s. At a deeper level, the recent crisis draws attention to an apparent global shift in economic and political power toward Asia.

By the time President Obama took office, the United States seemed to most outside observers to be falling well short of being the attractive model and projecting the confident image it had in the immediate post-cold war period. Some aspects of its leadership, notably the propensity to view international issues through a security lens, were far from attractive to public opinion in most of the region's democracies. Instead of an "end-of-history" Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), it was now building a "fence" controlling illicit movements across its border with Mexico. Its closest partner in Latin America found itself implausibly characterized by the media as an incipiently "failed" state, and the promised reform of U.S. immigration law had been kicked into the long grass. It is worth stressing that if the most important bilateral relationship of the United States went sour, all the other issues that it faces in the hemisphere would be overshadowed. Furthermore, if that troubled bilateral link could be revived and placed on a more equal footing, the Obama administration would establish a precedent that would serve it well in relation to the rest of the region.

Small initial disappointments in Cuba, Haiti, and Honduras will no doubt pass, leaving no more than a modestly bad taste behind. But as the studies in this volume indicate, there are potentially bigger pitfalls ahead if the same approach is applied to future regional challenges that may emerge before the end of Obama's first term. As already noted, the tensions dividing ALBA and even Brazil from the Obama administration have the potential to escalate and could interact with intermestic issues and with other international irritants to damage Washington's more general international diplomacy. Given the severity of the security challenges that Obama now faces in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the still fragile state of the international economy, it could prove very costly for Washington to allow unnecessary frictions in the Western Hemisphere to spiral out of control.

This is not to underplay the positive tendencies discussed by Abe Lowenthal in chapter 1, but to sound a note of concern about the risks confronting the Obama administration in the subcontinent as the cumulative adverse momentum of the past years works through the system. The underlying assumption is that it is in almost everyone's interest (that of the United States and Latin America, even Havana, La Paz, and Caracas) for these risks to be managed prudently. The conditions still exist for intelligent multilateral cooperation to maximize areas of common interest. But to reinforce this potential will require a coherent overarching policy framework and more sustained attention than has been in evidence so far.

Compared with other regions of the world, even Washington's most awkward Latin American neighbors are not, in essence, that intractable. (The European Union has neighbors such as Algeria, Serbia, and Belarus to contend with; China has to live with North Korea and Burma; India abuts Pakistan.) Those who assume that U.S. preferences will ultimately prevail if there is ideological polarization must consider the risk that, on the contrary, in the current climate escalation may rally regional opinion against Washington.

A small straw in the wind was the February 2010 summit in Cancún hosted by the Mexican government. Participants agreed to broaden the Rio Group to thirty-one members but excluded the United States and Canada. So long as the Obama administration works effectively with the Mexican government on bilateral issues and the OAS retains a sufficiently broad base of support in the region (which would mean it could not serve as a mere transmission belt for made-in-Washington priorities), the Cancún initiative may not have much impact. But its existence does underscore the fact that many U.S. allies in the hemisphere share President Lula da Silva's resistance to any variant of Pan-Americanism that seems like a one-sided "coalition

of the willing" to serve an essentially unilateral U.S. agenda (even if some also bridle at Brazil's hegemonic ambitions). From a Mexican viewpoint, for instance, such an initiative might serve to avert the danger of being left behind as the rest of Latin America builds regional institutions outside the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But it could also reflect some degree of estrangement between the United States and even its closest neighbor. While there is scant likelihood of the ALBA minority taking over such a grouping, it could serve as a sounding board for hostility to the United States. A policy that emphasizes cooperation and shared interests over divergences will produce much more positive results and weaken unnecessarily divisive and provocative alternatives.

The sterile results of hegemonic presumption are apparent in the tensions between Brazil and the United States over Iran. Since Brazil currently holds a seat on the UN Security Council (where the United States favors imposing tighter sanctions on Iran), this divergence is of geopolitical significance. When Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was invited to visit Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela, Secretary of State Clinton warned South America to "consider the consequences" of deepening regional ties with Iran. Before her arrival on an official visit to Brazil on March 7, 2010, President Lula countered by stating that he was going to visit Iran and did not have to account for his actions to anybody: "Each country exercises democracy as it sees fit. The U.S. does so in its way and not everybody agrees with how their government behaves."⁷ This is less a statement of ideological divergence and more about the need for equal respect among the United States and its allies.

There is a risk of escalating provocative rhetoric—Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim even compared the Clinton campaign against Iran with pre-Iraq war reports about Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction"—but the administration would be wise to ignore such barbs. Indeed, a better response would be to highlight the fact that under the Treaty of Tlatelolco, Latin America has established a large nuclear-free zone, an achievement to be celebrated given that it required cooperation and leadership from many politically disparate countries. This shows how the region can work together to set an example of good practice to the rest of the world, one that should also chime in with Obama's broader foreign policy agenda.

In the event, Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela gave congressional testimony following the remarks of President Lula in which he declared that the U.S. administration intended to be "clear-eyed and proactive" in countering attempts to expand authoritarian or populist rule in the Americas, and by listing the countries whose democratic practices merited

U.S. approval. That list excluded not only Nicaragua and Venezuela but also Bolivia and Ecuador. But this risks inappropriately bracketing diverse cases, some of which may merit severe criticism on democratic grounds, while others arguably perform no worse than some of Washington's favorites. Given Washington's past record of one-sidedness, the Obama administration's lists of the virtuous should be kept to a minimum and based on robust independent criteria: to act otherwise only serves to strengthen "anti-American" populism. On some "red-line issues," the United States is bound to remain unbending whatever its partners think, but, as this chapter has shown, beyond that, at least over the short run, Obama's Washington has too often preferred to take sides in a divided region, rather than to seek reconciliation there.

Not all risks to Washington's standing in the region come from the left, of course. The Honduran episode provided a small illustration of what could happen if larger republics strongly subject to conservative influences (such as Colombia or Peru) become politically divided. The challenges arising from organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, and arms trading could also become more acute. Blocking the Mexican access route to the U.S. market is not necessarily a solution, especially if it generates more instability in the Caribbean. There is also a range of other unpredictably contentious issues—the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, for example, illustrates how the best-laid plans can go unexpectedly awry.

So there are risks in the Americas, and the Obama administration cannot afford to neglect them. But the United States retains a considerable amount of "soft" power in Latin America, and the tradition with regional problem solving and consensus building is strong. If Washington intends to deploy its "smart" power to improve its currently damaged international position, the Western Hemisphere is one place that favors Obama's thoughtful and nuanced "smartness."

There is an obvious coda to this concluding observation, however. Many of the foreign policy challenges reviewed in this chapter, and in this book, concern issues that also impinge on U.S. domestic politics. Often, therefore, an administration's freedom of action is sharply constrained by the inclinations of the U.S. Congress, a body that is in turn often constrained by powerful lobbying interests, the media, and the U.S. electorate. A deep inertia is also built into the policy stances of many government agencies that will continue their understanding of "business as usual" unless actively redirected by their political masters.

But in a democratic Western Hemisphere, it is not sufficient for the U.S. administration to plead inability to act owing to domestic political

constraints. These exist in the other republics as well and can cause patience with one-sided U.S. positions to run thin. So if Washington were to prove neither smart nor soft in the region, existing risks in this friendly neighborhood could exact a high price, distracting the United States from more urgent dangers elsewhere and casting doubt over the administration's overall foreign policy competence. If it cannot improve on the legacy it inherited in the Americas, its prospects of making headway in other more difficult arenas may be cast into serious doubt.

Latin America provides the United States with a relatively democratic and amicable regional environment. At the same time, responsible governments there also need to consider the risks that a U.S. setback could pose to their national interests. Even if the Obama team has to focus on priorities elsewhere, and may sometimes lapse into thoughtless hegemonism, it remains a considerably more promising hemispheric partner than the administration that preceded it and could also prove much better than what could come later. So all concerned have a strong interest in avoiding too many unnecessary missed opportunities for regional cooperation. Even a community of good neighbors can fall out if they fail to attend to each other.

Notes

1. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 stipulates that it is the State Department, not the Pentagon, that sets policy and makes decisions governing military assistance programs, and establishes a variety of democracy and human rights conditions to foreign assistance.

2. The International Institute for Strategic Studies "Military Balance 2010" report warns against military instability in South America, although it does not endorse the view that a cumulative "arms race" is yet under way. In 2008 Colombia's military manpower totaled 310,567, the second largest in Latin America, behind Brazil with 334,743. Venezuela was fourth—after Mexico—with 163,364, far behind its U.S.-backed neighbor, while little Ecuador had only 37,448 military. *A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America* (Buenos Aires: RESDAL, 2008), p. 98.

3. As quoted by Michael Shifter, "Obama and Latin America: New Beginnings, Old Frictions," *Current History*, February 2010, p. 69.

4. Washington policymakers may have forgotten the coup of October 2, 1963, but Honduran elites surely remembered it when they ousted President Zelaya on June 28, 2009. In 1963, with a presidential election due later that month, the Honduran military ignored warnings from the U.S. embassy and military command in Panama and bundled the democratically elected President Villeda Morales into exile in Costa Rica. Although U.S. ambassador Arthur W. Burrows warned that "President

Kennedy would suspend economic aid if the revolt took place . . . his conservative opponents answered Burrows's threats by arguing that any aid cut-off by Washington would be momentary and that Burrows and company would be back in six months." Dario A. Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870–1972* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 113. In the event, this Honduran coup signaled the end of Alliance for Progress–inspired resistance to military interventions.

5. Abraham Lowenthal, "The United States and Latin America: Ending the Hegemonic Presumption," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1976.

6. As I tried to demonstrate in "Navigating in a Fog: Metanarrative in the Americas Today," in *Which Way Latin America? Hemispheric Politics Meets Globalization*, edited by Andrew F. Cooper and Jorge Heine (United Nations University Press, 2009), chap. 1.

7. As quoted in the *Financial Times* (London), March 10, 2010.