

The Obama Doctrine

LATIN AMERICANS CELEBRATED BARACK OBAMA'S 2008 election as leader of the United States, believing he offered an opportunity for a new start. Many even hoped his victory meant the continuation of an extraordinary electoral wave that had swept the region over the previous decade and brought to power in one country after another presidents representing historic social-justice movements: trade unionism with Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva; indigenous peasant organizing with Bolivia's Evo Morales; Liberation Theology with Paraguay's Fernando Lugo; left developmentalism with Ecuador's Rafael Correa, who holds a Ph.D. in economics; and military nationalism and Bolivarianism with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. In other countries, presidents with deep roots in new left insurgencies, middle class social democracies, and populism have been elected.

These leaders, many of them governing countries that had abolished slavery decades before Appomattox outlawed it in the United

States, were eager to accept Obama into their ranks, believing that he represented the United States's own progressive history. Chávez compared him to Martin Luther King Jr. and Lula called his victory "transcendent." The region had for decades been subject to an extreme application of free-market militarism—what is called neoliberalism in Latin America, and Reaganomics in the United States—the disastrous effects of which were finally being felt in the United States, with the fallout from George W. Bush's wars and the financial crisis. The chickens had come home to roost, as they say, but Latin Americans didn't so much cackle as issue a collective sigh of relief, hoping that Obama would align the policies of the United States with the values the rest of the Americas holds dear: justice, solidarity, and some degree of social equality and welfare. As Obama and his team of advisers began to talk about getting out of Iraq and returning to Keynesian economics, it looked like, as Chávez's foreign minister put it, "the winds of change were blowing north."

Yet after more than a year in office, it seems that Obama's election didn't extend the wave of social democracy, but marked the point where it broke and rolled back.

Empire's Workshop makes the case for the importance of Latin America in the development of U.S. diplomacy. The region is often simply described as "Washington's backyard." A better metaphor would be to think of Latin America as the United States's strategic reserve, the place ascendant foreign policy makers regroup following periods of economic and political retrenchment, to work out new diplomatic tactics in response to changing times. In turn, this rehearsal allows new governing coalitions to coalesce and form a coherent worldview, often from a hodgepodge of potentially contradictory ideas—what historian William Appleman Williams called a "conception of the world and how it works, and a strategy for acting upon that outlook on a routine basis as well as in times of crisis."

Twice in the last century, the United States turned to Latin

America to regroup following crises that crippled the United States's ability to project its power beyond its borders. In the 1930s, in the face of Latin America's increasingly radicalized opposition to Washington's militarism along with the economic contraction of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed the Good Neighbor policy, providing a blueprint for what political scientists now define as "smart," or "soft," power, the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion," according to Harvard's Joseph S. Nye, through the use of multilateral institutions, mutually beneficial policies, cultural exchanges, and commercial relations.

While many of the main struts of the Good Neighbor policy were actually forced on FDR by Latin Americans—particularly the United States's recognition of the principle of absolute sovereignty and its renunciation of the right to intervention—the fact that Washington was able to incorporate them into its diplomacy testifies to the agile and co-optive power of an empire in ascendance. In retrospect, a serious case could be made—even stronger than I offer in this book—that the 1933 Montevideo Pan-American Conference, where FDR's Secretary of State Cordell Hull recognized the absolute sovereignty of Latin American nations, was the single most successful event in the history of U.S. foreign policy: it allowed for the quick passage of a number of reciprocal trade agreements, beginning an economic recovery that allowed the United States to ready itself for the looming world war; it helped consolidate a "power bloc" of export-focused, technologically intensive corporations, the foundation of the United States's postwar economic primacy; and it provided a blueprint for the construction of a global liberal multinational order, over which Washington would preside.

But then in the 1980s, with cascading crises limiting the effectiveness of this order, the rising conservative movement looked to Central America to rehabilitate "hard power."

The New Right alliance that emerged from the Central American crucible brought together the two currents that gave its militarism

intellectual legitimacy and grassroots energy: neoconservatives and the Religious Right. The ideas that unite neocons and theocons come from diverse sources, with deep roots in U.S. political culture: a mistrust of multilateral negotiation; a belief that evil exists as a motivating force in human affairs; an ethical conviction that U.S. military supremacy should be used to confront that evil; and a celebration of the free market as a site of human fulfillment and moral discipline. Ronald Reagan's long Central American campaign offered an opportunity for secular and Christian interpretations of these ideals to merge. At the same time, the Contra War provided a venue where militarists, neoconservatives, and religious activists could figure out how to undercut domestic opposition—be it in the press, the congress, the State Department, or even the CIA—to the president's ability to wage war. It was in Central America, in other words, where civilian and religious militarists first put into place neoconservatism as a governing philosophy—the first step in a long march to restore the imperial presidency, which eventually led straight to war in Iraq.

That war, of course, proved to be a disaster, paving the way, many hoped, for the emergence of a new foreign policy coalition united behind Barack Obama. As in the 1930s, Latin America seemed well positioned to help Washington work out a new diplomatic strategy—specifically, the “new multilateralism” Obama and his top advisers, like U.N. ambassador Susan Rice, were calling for, a promise to solve transnational problems like poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation in a cooperative manner. There were no immediate threats to the United States emanating from the region, no major interstate conflicts, no nation developing nuclear weapons or moving to cut access to vital resources; Venezuela continued to sell its oil to the United States.

Not only was Latin America not a threat, it was potentially an inspiration. Empire's workshop, yes, but also democracy's, a place where the fundamental values that comprise any progressive

agenda—tolerance, welfare, community, dignity, equality, solidarity, pluralism, sovereignty—continued to be fought for by the landless, peasants, Native Americans, feminists, gay-rights advocates, unionists, and environmentalists. With rights receding elsewhere, they were expanding in Latin America, including, in Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Chile, important gains in gay rights. All of the presidents mentioned above, along with new social democratic leaders elected since Obama's inauguration, such as El Salvador's Mauricio Funes and Uruguay's José Mujica, had their shortcomings and limitations. Yet in a world awash in militarism, environmental depredation, fundamentalism, and extremism, at times it seemed as if Latin America was the last bastion of the Enlightenment. If Obama couldn't put his “new multilateralism” into effect there, it's hard to imagine where he could.

It wouldn't take much to improve U.S.-Latin America relations, and a number of mainstream policy groups offered recommendations. Obama could, for example, concede to long-standing Brazilian requests to reduce tariffs and subsidies that protect the U.S. agricultural market, opening it to Brazilian commodities, especially soy and sugar, as well as value-added ethanol. He could scale back military operations in Colombia—including the Pentagon's recent push to establish a series of controversial military bases there—and de-escalate the failed “War on Drugs,” as Latin America's leading intellectuals and policy makers, including many former presidents, are demanding. And the White House could push for a renewal of congress's expired assault-weapons ban, as requested by Mexico, battered by over five thousand narcotics-related murders a year, many of them committed with smuggled U.S. guns. Washington also could begin to drop the five-decade-old trade embargo on Cuba, thus burying a Cold War relic that continues to tarnish the United States's image. The payoff for any of the above steps would be better relations with Brazil, Latin America's largest economy and key to

any reconstructed hemispheric diplomacy. Ending the Cuban embargo, for instance, would be an enticement to Brazil to cooperate with Washington, since its formidable agro-industry is beginning to invest in Cuba, and would be well placed to export to the U.S. market.

The new administration could recommit to a multilateral foreign policy by showing a willingness to work with the Organization of American States and to leash the quasi-privatized “democracy promotion” organizations—largely funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Agency for International Development and run by the International Republican Institute—that have become a vector of transnational conservative coalition building throughout the hemisphere. These groups are a direct outgrowth of Reagan’s Central American policy of the 1980s, and today do overtly what the CIA used to do covertly, as one of the NED’s founders, Allen Weinstein, admitted: they fund oppositional “civil society” groups that use the rhetoric of democracy and human rights to menace left governments throughout the region, including the promotion of an aborted coup in Venezuela in 2002 and successful ones in Haiti in 2004 and Honduras in 2009.* Similar destabilization efforts tried to topple Bolivia’s Evo Morales in 2008 but failed, at least partly because Brazil and Chile let it be known they would not accept those kinds of machinations in their backyard. The Obama administration could rein these groups in by agreeing to Latin American demands to make their funding more transparent and their actions more accountable.

Another step that would improve relations with southern neighbors would be to provide a path to U.S. citizenship for the millions of undocumented Latin Americans, mostly from Mexico, Central

*William Robinson, Jonah Gindin, “The United States, Venezuela, and ‘democracy promotion’: William Robinson interviewed,” August 3, 2005, at [openDemocracy.com](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/venezuela_2730.jsp) (http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/venezuela_2730.jsp).

America, the Caribbean, and the Andes. Such a move would also be smart domestic politics for the Democrats, guaranteeing the loyalty of the Latino vote in 2012 and, by creating millions of new voters, moving Texas and other southwestern states closer to swing-state status. Perhaps even more importantly, it would provide progressives with a real wedge issue: Catholics, increasingly pulled into the conservative camp by issues such as abortion and gay rights, overwhelmingly favor immigration reform; so do Latinos in Florida, which means that immigration reform has the potential of neutralizing the toxic power of Miami Cubans, a voting bloc that has been key in pushing for an aggressive foreign policy.

It wouldn’t be easy to implement any of these proposed reforms. But they are not pie-in-the-sky. Each could be justified purely on pragmatic grounds—as they indeed have been by mainstream think tanks, like the Council on Foreign Relations—as a way to reestablish U.S. influence in Latin America. Taken together they could serve as a diplomatic revolution, one which would not weaken U.S. power but consolidate it much the way the Good Neighbor policy did, allowing Washington to more effectively project its influence in the region.

That not one of the above reforms has been adopted, or, for that matter, even seriously considered, provides an opportunity to do an autopsy of sorts on U.S. diplomacy, allowing a precise determination of how domestic ideologies, narrow corporate and sectional interests, and a sclerotic political system are quickening the decline of the United States as a global power.

Observers of American foreign policy—from Charles A. Beard in the 1930s to William Appleman Williams in the 1960s and 1970s—have emphasized the United States’s unique ability to subsume competing interests and ideas into a flexible and vital diplomacy in defense of a general “national interest.” Starting in the 1930s, multilateralism was underwritten by the consolidation of an

export-based corporate power bloc, which provided important ballast for the twin goals of the New Deal consensus: the promotion of reform capitalism abroad and the extension of political liberalism at home. Then as the New Deal consensus frayed and its corporate supporters faced increasing global competition, Reagan bet the bank—literally—on finance capital, along with the militarism needed to open up the Third World, providing a solution, however punitive and volatile, to the crisis that was the 1970s.

But now, with Reaganomics, or neoliberalism, having exhausted itself, there is no sign of a new economic or political coalition capable of developing an effective response to the current predicament. Deeply invested in war production and speculative capital and too intensely fond of the interest the Third World (and the United States) pay on its bonds and debt, the financiers of today's Democratic Party are disinclined to support any attempt to move beyond neoliberalism. As for the Democratic Party itself, its leaders, scared of seeming soft on foreign-policy issues, are terrified of the antimilitarism of the party's rank and file, and therefore unwilling to nurture a possible alternative to neoconservatism (unlike Republicans who are organically linked to their militaristic base and indeed depend on the rhetoric of perpetual war in order to hold that base together).

So confronted with a sustained economic contraction, worsened by a disastrous overleveraging of military power in Iraq and Afghanistan, expansion has given way to involution, paralyzing the ability of foreign policy makers to adjust to changing circumstances. This paralysis is not specific to the Western hemisphere. Efforts to modernize U.S. diplomacy elsewhere—climate change for instance—have been routinely blocked by domestic interests, both petty and powerful.

In the case of Latin America, the issue of biofuels is instructive. The idea of liberalizing the U.S. agricultural market—and have the reality of economic policy somewhat match the rhetoric of free

trade—is recommended by all mainstream foreign policy intellectuals as a way to jumpstart the stalled Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, which Brazil has taken the lead in opposing. Obama knows the importance of Brazil, having nominated George W. Bush's outgoing Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, Thomas Shannon, as his ambassador to the country. Shannon is a Republican, but he is not a movement Republican. He's also well respected in Latin America as well as in U.S. establishment circles, described by the journal *Foreign Policy* as the "most talented and successful individual" to serve as Washington's envoy to Latin America "in at least two decades." Yet when Shannon said in his confirmation hearing that he favored a reduction in the 54-cent per gallon tariff on imported ethanol, Senator Chuck Grassley, representing the agro-industry state of Iowa, put a hold on his nomination until the White House promised that it had no plans to change tariff policy. The administration's quick buckling was probably driven by its futile attempt to win over Grassley for health-care reform, a further indicator of how foreign policy is held hostage by domestic politics.

Actually, the fitful progress of Shannon's nomination provides a good summary of the ability of unimpressive politicians to paralyze U.S. diplomacy: following Grassley's hold, Jim DeMint, South Carolina's first-term senator, blocked Shannon's confirmation to protest Obama's Honduras policy. That was followed with a block by Florida's interim senator, George LeMieux, who wanted assurances that the United States would not normalize relations with Cuba. This paralysis, in turns, hastens decline: without a top-level envoy in Brasilia to lobby on the behalf of U.S. industry, Boeing, in January 2009, lost out to France's Dassault on a \$20 billion contract to supply Brazil with hundreds of new military jets. And so it goes.

Similar obstacles stand in the way of the other reforms. The Cuban lobby, along with the broader right, prevents a normalization of relations with Havana. Fear of a backlash seems to have killed any hope of humanizing immigration policy. Fear of the National Rifle

Association stops a renewal of the assault-weapons ban. As to the trillion-dollars-and-counting War on Drugs, the Democratic Party is deeply committed to continuing Plan Colombia, the centerpiece of that war. Plan Colombia is, after all, a legacy of Bill Clinton, and much of the many millions of dollars spent on it has gone directly into coffers of corporate sponsors of the Democratic Party like Connecticut's United Technologies and other northeastern defense contractors. Despite some early indication that Obama would begin to dial down Plan Colombia, he wound up franchising it, subsidizing Mexican President Felipe Calderón's crusade against narcotics cartels, which analysts left, center, and right deem a disaster, with a similar multimillion dollar military aid package. Plan Colombia in fact is now considered by the Pentagon to be the Latin American edition of GCOIN, or Global Counterinsurgency, the current term used by strategists to downplay the religious and ideological associations of Bush's bungled "global war on terror" and focus on a more modest program of extending state rule over "lawless" areas—and held up as a blueprint for how to achieve success in Afghanistan and other global hotspots.

Then there is economic policy. Instead of trying to cooperate with Latin Americans to work out a post-neoliberal framework, balancing calls for sustainable development with corporate profit, the Democratic Party remains firmly Wall Street's party. Shortly after taking office, Obama quickly abandoned his pledge to renegotiate NAFTA and, with Washington's blessing, the IMF continues to push Latin American countries to liberalize their economies. On a visit to Argentina, Arturo Valenzuela, Obama's Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, even went as far as to urge a return to the investment climate of 1996—which would be something like Buenos Aires calling on the United States to reinflate the recent Greenspan bubble.

On these and any number of issues, the obstacles that block modernization of hemispheric relations reside not in Caracas, La

Paz, or Havana but closer to home. And exactly because Latin America presents no real threat, there is no incentive to confront entrenched interests that oppose such modernization. "Obama," said a top-level Argentine diplomat despairingly, "has decided that Latin America isn't worth it. He gave it to the right."

It is one thing to give the region to the right when it is part of your governing coalition, as Reagan did, which helped him to synchronize foreign and domestic politics. It's quite another to do so when the right is the opposition, when it can use the gift to broaden its base and focus its critique.

Take, for instance, the June 2009 coup in Honduras, which led to the overthrow of a democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Executors of the coup claimed to be saving democracy from the clutches of Hugo Chávez, and they tried to present themselves to the world as middle-class moderns. Yet their style was more cold war gothic. Suddenly Honduras seemed to be hurled back to the 1980s, when paranoia reigned, death squads ruled, and anticommunism justified widespread murder. Defenders of Zelaya's ouster included a cast of characters straight out of the Contra War: antiliberation theology Opus Dei hierarchs, conservative evangelicals, School-of-the-Americas trained military officers, and right-wing avengers, like Fernando "Billy" Joya, a member of the notorious Battalion 316, whose assassination of hundreds of civilians was covered up by then U.S. ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte. The destabilization campaign that preceded Zelaya's downfall came directly from the democracy-promotion handbook described above, and was initiated by none other than the old Iran-Contra hand, Otto Reich.* Even Pinochet's daughter Lucia appeared to endorse the coup, praising its leaders for continuing her father's legacy. Scores of

*William Finnegan, "An Old Fashioned Coup," *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2009.

Zelaya supporters have been killed since his ouster, including a number of gay, lesbian, and transgender activists. Hundreds have been tortured, hundreds more threatened with death, and thousands arrested and held captive for some period of time. Violence against women has skyrocketed, environmental regulations rolled back, the minimum wage lowered, and abortion laws tightened.

Obama at first came out fairly strongly against the coup, which provided an unexpected opportunity to work with the Organization of American States, along with Brazil, to restore democracy. Yet his administration wasted months sending mixed signals, passing the advantage to Republican adversaries, who didn't miss the chance to showcase Obama's indecisiveness. In the late 1970s the Sandinista revolution revealed the limits of Jimmy Carter's tolerance of Third World nationalism. The more Carter tried to appease hawks in his administration, the more he was accused of vacillating, thus opening a breach through which the New Right could march. A similar dynamic is taking place today. The overthrow of Zelaya has galvanized the transnational right, helping, as a quick survey of tea-party rally placards, conservative blogs, and Republican talking points shows, to crystallize and reconcile a number of half-formed ideas and fears, transforming Obama's mild reformism into wild-eyed populism. Obama, said Texas Senator John Cornyn, "must stand with the Honduran people, not with Hugo Chávez." It's the kind of grandstanding that Republicans, absent a domestic agenda, have come to rely on.

But it worked. The White House capitulated and endorsed the coup. Brazil, in turn, began to see the United States's new president less as embodying transcendence than continuance, and it offered a tentative definition of an Obama Doctrine. Allowing the coup to stand, said Lula's top foreign policy adviser, Marco Aurélio Garcia, was "introducing the 'theory of the preventive coup' in Latin America"—by which Garcia means an extension of the Bush Doctrine's advocacy of preventive wars.

Having given up its attempt to work with Brazil to create a new

hemispheric order, there are indications that the White House is betting that an upcoming round of presidential elections in South America will restore more pliable governments. On a recent trip to Buenos Aires, for instance, Valenzuela, Obama's top envoy to the region, met with a number of extreme right-wing politicians but not with moderate opposition leaders, drawing criticism from center-left President Cristina Fernández's government. In Chile, a right-wing billionaire was elected president, the country's first elected conservative president in half a century. And if Lula's Workers Party loses Brazil's October presidential vote, as polls indicate is a possibility, the Andean left, particularly Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, will be increasingly isolated, caught between the War on Drugs to the north and administrations more willing to accommodate Washington's interests to the south. Fidel Castro, normally an optimist, has recently speculated that before Obama finishes his presidency, "there will be six to eight rightist governments in Latin America." Twenty-first-century containment for twenty-first-century socialism.