



HEMISPHERE FOCUS

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WAITING FOR OTTO

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A national emergency has developed in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center towers and Pentagon. The diplomacy of the United States now needs its resources deployed in all regions of the world. The management of Western Hemispheric policy may not be up to the task. Capable people may be in place but the key driver, in the form of an assistant secretary of state, has yet to be confirmed for this part of the world. The reasons are political, disingenuous, personal, and hark back to debates now beginning to be of interest to historians-Caribbean Basin policy under President Ronald Reagan.

The immediate result is that no senior Latin American policy leadership closely associated with President George W. Bush is in place. Senate leadership needs to realize that U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere will soon become shapeless and insolvent while Senate leaders attempt to score points over the Central American conflicts of the 1980s. They will waste away the last decade of U.S. policy breakthroughs in this part of the world, some of which was achieved under a Democratic administration. Latin American and Caribbean governments have cause to worry about this paralysis and the rollback in U.S. interest it appears to suggest. And more immediately, Washington needs the support of the region in what the administration has now called its primary foreign policy focus-the response to last week's catastrophic attacks in New York and Washington.

A One-Man Band

Nine months into the new presidency, official Washington, let alone Latin American capitals, awaits a more detailed articulation of regional policy and for the president's men (and women) to implement it. George W. Bush is most likely the best spokesman for that policy and the U.S. foreign relationships with the Latin world may be the ones where Bush is the most at ease. But the president is also nearly a one-man band. As such, the band plays Latin policy tunes at infrequent intervals, the policy repertoire and band players appear at times drawn from previous concerts, while the crowds in the region wait for the full show to appear in their neighborhood. Not good.

The president did set an early fast pace of get-togethers with leaders of the Western Hemisphere, culminating in the April regional summit in Quebec City. But any follow-up has in practice run up against the realities of a slow personnel transition and policy distractions elsewhere in the world. Early policy favorites, such as free trade, temporarily appear in abeyance. Mexico is another policy highlight, but this is an area in part self-propelled by Bush's energetic and creative Mexican counterpart, President Vicente Fox. The latter's high-profile visit to Washington after Labor Day demonstrates the degree to which that creativity is a challenge to a U.S. administration still piecing together hemispheric priorities-and related domestic policy interests. Elsewhere, the notion of a Caribbean Third Border initiative rises to the occasion as a creative approach, but policy frameworks are of themselves not quite a substitute for content in policy

. Efficient and cautious bureaucracies waiting for political leadership to appear at their doorstep manage everything else-the Andean region and Venezuela, Mercosur relations, electoral uncertainties in Nicaragua and other pressures throughout Central America, Haiti-as ongoing files. Let's face it; until that leadership is in place the license for creativity in policymaking-the oft-repeated "thinking outside the box" approach-will not be fostered. And since September 11 the world has changed.

Our interlocutors throughout the hemisphere are understanding and the administration's most senior leadership-the president-retains credit. Yet, in the Internet age of e-commerce, if not quite e-governance, that access to information, speed of decision, and synergies of all kinds dominates, the long transitional interlude in U.S. policymaking toward the Western Hemisphere is alarming. Both Democratic and Republican leadership bear responsibility for this. Official Washington simply needs to do better.

Waiting Versus Policymaking

Most appointments related to the Western Hemisphere are inching forward at a glacial pace. By mid-July only two positions had actually been filled, neither requiring congressional confirmation (a senior post at the National Security

Council, and a slot on the Department of State's Policy Planning staff). Another one, requiring Senate approval, was in active mode toward final processing (U.S. envoy to the Organization of American States)-and is now confirmed. A relevant Pentagon position has also been filled. Since then, a trickle of ambassadorial appointments has appeared. To argue that this pace is not particularly different from that of previous administration's transitions is not all that helpful-the transition is objectively slow-and overlooks worrisome features of the current process.

This ambivalence encourages critical views of what is purported to be appropriate U.S. engagement in Latin America. It reinforces stereotypes and speculations about the supposed priorities of U.S. interests toward the region. Some critics paint the administration as salivating at the prospects of finishing off the Cold War in the Caribbean Basin. Critics seem to forget that the battle was won.

There are broader implications. Opportunities are being both wasted away and endlessly twisted. Trade policy, a cornerstone of regional policy for more than a decade, faces greater uncertainties as economic and social circumstances grow throughout the region and the U.S. economy loses steam. Meanwhile, anything associated with defense and security concerns remains a difficult choice for policymakers. The same applies to the war on drugs. Anything having to do with counterinsurgency campaigns is politically radioactive. After the events on September 11, attitudes will have to change. Likewise, better relations with Cuba are fashionable but a policy more demanding of the leadership in Havana is viewed as retrograde. Sadly all of this is symptomatic of a rudderless foreign policy approach to the Western Hemisphere, navigating regional waters at a pace that reflects neither urgencies nor a sense of opportunities. None of this matches the president's genuinely broad interest in hemispheric affairs in tandem with the active political commitment to reach out to the Latin diaspora in the United States.

In Washington's cocktail receptions and idea factories all of this has so far been conveniently couched in reasonable terms but with a disingenuous salute to bipartisanship in foreign policy. Talk is that the White House is unable to assemble its team because of its unwise-read extremist-appointments. Yet, accepting this argument would lead the president to essentially abdicate his views of regional policy as a starting point, including related nominations.

Ironically, Bush's views are hardly "extremist" by current policy standards. That the White House and its Democratic counterparts shaping Latin America policy in the Senate have differing views regarding how Central America was "won" more than a decade ago, and diverge on how to deal with Castro, is historically understandable. But critics of the president obviously prefer an arrangement whereby their personnel choices become the template of policy, with which the White House is then invited to synergize. This specifically characterizes the circumstances surrounding the nomination of Otto Reich to be assistant secretary (Western Hemisphere) at the Department of State. In effect, the debate is not about whether he is qualified but is about perceived defects of past U.S. policy.

Forgetting History

The broadest line of thinking that frames the above environment seems to imply that because the conclusion of the Cold War has removed ideology from regional confrontations, men (and women) with strong convictions—about freedom for example—need not apply for service with Uncle Sam. The battle over democracy and free enterprise has been won, Washington no longer has regional strategic interests, a neutered style of engagement in line with purported Latin sensitivities and priorities in this area is therefore preferred. Terrorist attacks in New York and Washington now undermine these simple views of the Post Cold-war world.

In his earlier days as a critic of U.S.-Mexican relations, Jorge Castaneda, now Mexico's energetic foreign minister, alluded to this new setting in his *Utopia Unarmed*. Written in the early 1990s, he concluded that U.S. attention to Latin American affairs would decline in a post-Cold-War era (U.S. "meddling" in the region's affairs would be a better descriptor of the thought he had in mind). Abe Lowenthal, sometime academic conceptualizer of Democratic Party approaches to Latin American policy, provided an updated interpretation in an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* last year. This creative piece noted that U.S. policy toward Latin American affairs had generated a bipartisan consensus in the 1990s over trade and democracy. Coupled with the practical reality that the next administration would be facing greater policy demands on its resources elsewhere in the world, this suggested a stay-the-course approach to the Western Hemisphere, in effect an implied recommendation to change neither policy nor personnel. Very convenient.

Relegating Latin American affairs to second-class status was possibly a costly way to make the argument but one worth making if the objective was to deflect new (read Republican) U.S. foreign policy leadership from western hemisphere affairs. We have arrived at a point apparently where the search for "consensus" not only frames policymaking goals but also eliminates the need to seek alternatives. The framework of U.S.-Latin America in the 1990s was an end point, so this thinking goes, and little should be changed. The Clinton years, anchored by initiatives launched during the Bush *per se* years, achieved a policy plateau that now only needs to be sustained.

One can hear a faulty echo of Frank Fukuyama's "End of History" argument. Fukuyama's notion was that the consensus that liberal democracy generated globally represented a final point of mankind's ideological evolution. This led him to

speculate whether the battle over liberty and equality would sustain the relative sense of stability present in today's modern democracy. Or was this environment prone to deteriorate and its individual parts likely to turn on each other all over again? The challenge was and remains in the very triumph of democracy, and the liberty that democracy provides to be dissatisfied with democracy's blessings-and therefore the "potential to restart history."

For too many critics of U.S.-Latin American policy of the past 20 years, history has come to an end, ideology is dead, and convictions and U.S. ambitions no longer have a place in the definition of U.S. interests. Well, history has not come to an end. Instead, U.S. critics have been prone to *forget* history, even now wondering what recent conflicts in the Caribbean Basin during the Cold War were all about. Stephen Kinzer, critical chronicler of U.S. policy in Central America, poses this question in a summer issue of *The New York Review of Books*. Commenting on the stagnation of the Nicaraguan political process and its half-dictatorship, half-revolution, half-counterrevolution, half-democracy, and now less than halfway prosperity, Kinzer appears genuinely amazed as to why a war was even fought more than a decade ago. Because the outcome today seems so inconclusive there is a reluctance to appreciate what the Sandinista movement was doing: establishing a Marxist state with a Cuban support network held together by the Soviet Union. Nicaragua became a haven for an assortment of terrorist groups. This is not fiction, it actually happened. And the Sandinistas might be back in office by the end of this year following elections in November.

With the fading of history, this controversial period in U.S.-Latin American relations is too easily remembered in "equivalency" terms. In other words, Washington was no better than Moscow, and in the minds of many critics of U.S. policy, probably worse. Considering what was at stake at the time, this leads to a surprisingly simplistic vision of events: there were two sides to the conflict, the United States and the USSR, and we each engaged with similar instruments. Democracy, Marxism-just different sides of politics, political ideals that both superpowers abused in the end. Moscow lost; we won. That's all, folks. But critics of the U.S. experience, activists in academia, the media, and some in the halls of the U.S. Congress, appear to retain some resentment as to the outcome. They appear to have convinced themselves that in the end the moral cause of democracy and freedom was not quite ours and that our actions stained the outcome. Interesting, but try to explain that to the millions that suffered in Central America and the Caribbean (and elsewhere in the Americas), and the many who ended up fleeing to the United States (not Cuba) for refuge.

Focusing on Real Priorities

Most accounts of Latin American policy suggest that the region entered the new century in a stronger position than might have been expected a decade earlier. There was clearly much to be done, however, and many dangers ahead. A recent Inter-American Dialogue report makes that point quite nicely. However, now the Republicans are back. So, what Jay Norlinder in the *National Review* recently characterized as the vindication of Ronald Reagan's approach to Central America is in practice regarded as a potential for the return of the Vandals and a harbinger of bad things to come. Among various articulations of this thinking is a spring issue of the Washington Office on Latin America's *Cross Currents* that discusses many of the Bush appointments and perceived policy antecedents as a return to the dark ages of ideology and "hard-liners."

The critical refrain has been picked up in media assessments of the Bush administration's nominees whose experience harks back to the 1980s and early 1990s. The descriptions are simplistic and easily remembered since much of this is repetitive. A cottage industry of Web sites has appeared, including some devoted specifically to Otto Reich. The network has been hyperventilating with a concoction of facts and fiction and is fed by remnants of the 1980s along with some new recruits. Some of this was in evidence at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) convention held in early September in Washington. A resolution that the Center for International Policy, the Institute for Policy Studies, and the Washington Office on Latin America drafted repeated much of this but it was evident from conversation with conventioners that the specifics of the Reich issue were fuzzy at best. The packaging is amateurish and uninformed; shameful, really. Some of the commentary also includes unpleasantries regarding Cuban-Americans, Republicans, and supporters of Ronald Reagan.

This is hopefully not representative of any potential congressional assessment of key Latin American policy nominations. Differing assessments of Caribbean Basin policy in the 1980s and early 1990s remain a matter of legitimate academic debate. To extrapolate from that the notion that those associated with those policies-mind you, in the end, successful policies-are ipso facto questionable choices for appointments today appears narrowly partisan and alludes to little more than personal vendettas.

A content analysis of existing academic and serious policy literature on Central America in the 1980s is notable by the absence of references to either Reich or his office of public diplomacy, the *bête noir* of his critics. One superb recent example is William LeoGrande's *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, a massive volume by an American University academic with a critical writing record of Reagan-era policies: Reich does not even appear in the index. Even a sympathetic and narrower study of some of those events, the recently published *The Real Contra War* by Timothy C. Brown, makes no references to Reich or his office. Critics of Reich will view this as a confirmation of the

public propaganda office geared to issuing pro-administration views. Critics cannot have it both ways.

Overall, anyone genuinely interested in Latin American affairs will find little that is helpful to the construction of an effective regional policy in the twenty-first century. This is underscored by the refrain that the appointment of Otto Reich, or-until recently-John Negroponte to the United Nations, is generating "significant opposition and anxiety about the direction of Bush's Latin American policy." Significant opposition? Among what *relevant* constituency? The U.S. public? Most have never heard of Otto Reich, and frankly have a limited interest in obscure aspects of foreign policy events of the last century. Have Latin American and Caribbean governments expressed real concern? Hardly. Have the leaders of the region conveyed to President Bush-he has met all of them-some form of collective consensus about this matter? I don't think so.

There are really only two certainties about this process. First, governments in the region will soon have a reason to question the seriousness of U.S. policy-including that of congressional leadership-to this part of the world if the bickering continues to paralyze the U.S. appointment process. Washington's regional interlocutors are more concerned with having policy voices close to the White House, with wide regional experience, than politically correct appointments or bland bureaucratic choices. That is the criteria they use to judge U.S. appointments, and lawmakers on Capitol Hill should reflect on that reality. Even more importantly, I suspect that a cross-section of the U.S. public probably also endorses this view. This is the message to the inner beltway crowd: get on with it and let's get the job done.

Second, the only Latin leader that has staked a public position on this matter is Fidel Castro. He is unhappy about certain appointments, but then this is the same thoughtful mind that also more or less thinks that most U.S. leaders-most recently George W. Bush and Al Gore-are dangerous idiots. He has a right to his private thoughts on the matter but to express them publicly should not be a reenforcing argument to heed to critics of Bush appointments. To think that Washington's Latin American policy and personnel choices dovetail with the preferences of the aging bearded tropical dictator assigns to Cuba policy a central role in U.S. policymaking priorities that it does not deserve.

Those that oppose Otto Reich's nomination are not only fighting past battles but also presuming that the White House, let alone Ambassador Reich himself, are salivating at the prospects of spending the bulk of their energies unseating Fidel. As appealing as that prospect might be, the reality of regional priorities is quite different. What Cuba policy deserves is focused, measured, and consistent attention. This is quite different from the theatrics of the previous White House, and the schizophrenic politics associated with it.

Cuba is in vogue among both Congressional Democrats and now more Republicans but this also runs the danger of becoming an easy substitute for a discussion and articulation of Latin American policy. To put it bluntly, those that think that Cuba is a front rank item for U.S. policy are either still framing their thinking in a Cold War environment-when Cuba was important-or have a skewed vision of current U.S. policy priorities in the hemisphere. One wishes that the persistence of critics debating the deficiencies of U.S.-Cuban relations was matched by equally sustained interest toward other major regional policy issues.

This includes achieving a liberalized trading regime under the FTAA. This includes coming to grips with conflict and challenges to democratization in the Andean region. This includes putting our policy arms around an increasingly fast-paced momentum in the U.S.-Mexican relationship. This includes addressing the shaky financial stability and broader social viability of key economies in the region. In the end the more likely solution to the impasse in U.S.-Cuban relations is to forge an energetic engagement of U.S. Western Hemispheric policy, within which relevant policy needs toward Cuba will rise to the surface. For that to happen the United States needs an experienced Latin American foreign policy team and it needs it now.

Otto

If expertise, success in a variety of relevant foreign policy situations, and peer respect count in nominations for key posts, then Otto Reich's nomination makes sense. A recently issued letter of support that included more than 20 former career foreign services officers (*Foreign Service Friends of Otto Reich*-half of them ambassadors) underscores the professional community's endorsement of his nomination. Although many at this stage can claim Latin American and Caribbean policy experience and could be nominated, few have Reich's varied background. This begins with college and graduate degrees in Latin American affairs (UNC Chapel Hill and Georgetown) and military service in Panama. Those that actually know him, and have interacted with Reich over the course of his professional career, see him as a measured individual, also firmly committed to the ideal and principles that undergird the U.S. experience. That he has been in some tight spots is not an indication of bad judgment but rather a reflection of the confidence of senior national leadership in Otto Reich's inherent capability as a proven leader.

What has he done over the past 25 years? Reich led the U.S. Agency for International Development's Latin America office at a time of enormous expansion in the region (a post often curiously omitted from critics' version of Reich's résumé-as though it did not fit their perceived profile). In a previous incarnation he was head of the Washington office of the Council of

the Americas (corporate America's blue chip interest group toward the region), confirming in the minds of some a sell-out to big-business but is actually a background of considerable value in dealing with today's Latin American policy priorities. He served as ambassador to Venezuela, a significant foreign policy relationship and a country undergoing at the time (late 1980s) some serious sociopolitical turbulence from which it has yet to recover. Reich was point man on explaining U.S. policy toward the Caribbean Basin in the mid-1980s at a time when this part of the world consumed both the U.S. government's energies and widely engaged the U.S. public. That mission could have been a messy nightmare, and Reich's performance stands in stark contrast to the colossal failure of leadership judgement at the same time at the White House and the ensuing Iran-Contra fiasco.

In the past 10 years Reich has been associated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and also provided leadership to the Americas Forum, a substantive network of hemispheric policy professionals. He also ultimately developed a business not much different from what the bulk of Washington's bipartisan elite nomenclatura does on a daily basis. That he is painted as an arms merchant omits the significant fact that much of his association with the world of a U.S. defense aerospace contractor occurred after the Clinton administration had given the green light to seek business in South America (Chile to be specific). As for his commitments to Cuban freedom, those are values shared by the current president of the United States-and millions of U.S. citizens.

In the end one suspects that a majority of the U.S. Senate can approve Otto Reich's nomination. Speculation also arises as to whether the Senate Foreign Relations Committee might also in fact be hiding a favorable opinion. Asking further questions and delaying a vote is only a Washingtonian subterfuge. In the balance is not only an appointment but effective management and leadership of Western Hemispheric policy. The responsibilities are clear.

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