

## A ship with no anchor: Bush in Latin America

By Ivan Briscoe,  
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Hugo Chávez's operatic pursuit of a political "corpse" up and down the Americas provided the principal drama, but the most telling signs of the United States's radically reduced influence in its own landmass came in a more discreet fashion. It took Mexico's new president, a man cut straight from the most business-friendly cloth, to remind his visitor [1] George W Bush of certain home truths about ties between a rich, powerful, navel-gazing north and a socially turbulent, few-dollar-a-day south.

"While there are two such complimentary and unequal economies, one capital intensive and the other labour intensive, migration cannot be stopped, and much less so by decree", said Felipe Calderón [2] in a press conference, voicing a certain exasperation with the planned construction of a 1,100-kilometre frontier wall across the heart of a free-trade association [3].

The response from Bush in the town of Mérida - on the last stage of his five-country tour of the region from 8-14 March 2007 [4] - echoed those offered in the four countries he has previously visited: yes, his host was right, these are important matters, and they will be considered (for "family values do not end at the border"). Yet few illusions were left in the minds of Latin American leaders, since a lame duck US president with no cash, no great interest, the opposition party running Congress and a war or two to fight elsewhere is unlikely to fulfil or even remember his pledges.

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### A legacy of corrosion

The distrustful governments Bush met or avoided [8] on his tour can be seen as the typical products of a long period of US neglect: the French made the Habsburg royal Maximilian emperor of Mexico during the American civil war, while Juan Domingo rose to prominence in the latter stages of the second world war, winning the 1946 election by proclaiming his real opponent to be US ambassador Spruille Braden [9]. Yet the "anti-imperial" swell around Chávez is one thing; the weakness and wariness of governments who should in principle be the reference points for Washington in the hemisphere is another. Indeed this is the critical issue

that the state department should now be fretting over: never have its legs in Latin America been more brittle.

Central America [10] offers intriguing examples. This region, previously exposed to the most heavy-handed CIA-led interventions (Guatemala in 1954, Nicaragua in the 1980s), is no longer rebelling against the north - particularly now that over 10 percent of its economies depend on emigrants' remittances. Yet the traditional mode of US political leverage in the region has been support for elite-run anti-communist regimes, whose lack of democratic ballast [11] opened up fine opportunities for foreign nudging of their leaders through provision of arms or money.

The legacy of these regimes is not revolution, but corrosion. Guatemala may still be Washington's great regional friend, and was its candidate against Venezuela in an extended tussle [12] for a seat on the United Nations Security Council in late 2006 - thus becoming Bush's stop-off; but it is still digesting a numinous swirl of narco-violence, which has seen police chiefs flee for exile after the murder in captivity of four senior police officers, themselves under arrest [13] in a growing [14] scandal over the shooting and incineration of three parliamentary deputies from El Salvador and their driver in February 2007. Óscar Berger, the country's president, seems powerless to face the gradual takeover of his country's institutions by drug money. As an ally, he offers smiles and little more.

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Calderón's acerbic remarks appear to show that his own position in Mexico - fragile in the extreme after the contested election of July 2006 - will not benefit from clinging to a country which last year made 1.2 million arrests of Mexicans and central Americans on the border. Over in Colombia, meanwhile, Álvaro Uribe [32] stands out as the staunch ally and recipient of half this year's \$1.6 billion in aid; loyalty to the US is surely a *sine qua non* of his government. Yet once again certain tentative doubts over the benefits of such a close relationship have emerged on both sides in step with the judicial exploration of paramilitary ties [33] to the Bogotá establishment, permeated by succulent drug-related pay-offs since the times of Pablo Escobar.

Bush's natural Latin friends, in short, offered either a guarded welcome or warmth with no diplomatic reward. In the light of the Bolivarian [33] surge, something meatier and more resonant was required: proof that the White House cares deeply for the poor. Beyond a hospital boat, study grants, \$385 million in home loans and declarations of the president's "concern", proof was not forthcoming. And so Bush wisely clung to Brazil's [33] Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the most popular leader in the continent according to 2006's Latinobarómetro [34], and an antidote to the autocratic "special powers" of Venezuela's president.

### **No legs to stand on**

This relationship is a curious one. At its heart, it appears to rely on a fundamental accord of mutual non-interference, by which the United States agrees not to seek to shape Brazil's foreign policy, meddle too much in Mercosur [34], or revive the moribund Free Trade Area of the Americas [35]. In addition, Bush clearly respects Lula for his "self-made" attributes, just as the latter appears to appreciate Bush's urges for bodily contact. But building a progressive, soft-left alternative to Chávez on this basis is another matter. In fact the history of US attempts to forge just such a moderate leftwing Latin political front shows time and again that the atavistic appeal of narrow national interest is stronger.

Bush mentioned in a speech on the eve of his trip the main precedent for this kind of soft-left, pro-democratic movement - John F Kennedy's "alliance for progress [36]". Yet the fate of that plan, buried shortly after birth under a reflux of military power in the United States and the inculcation of national security doctrines across Latin America's top brass, proved just how fragile Washington's progressive inventions could be.

The logic of cold-war security in the 1960s and 1970s, or the Washington consensus of the 1990s, entailed altogether more tangible benefits: their ideology was clear, they confirmed the protection of core US interests, and they suited for a time the political and economic needs of Latin America's traditional ruling elite. As a rule, and try as it may, the United States has treated

its southern neighbours in a spirit of extreme conservatism. It is easy to picture the frowns in Washington or Langley if the decision were taken to make welfare-state-building a number-one strategic priority.

Even in the remote fantasy that Congress and the next US president proclaim wholehearted support and finance for a progressive bloc, anchored in the models of Lula or [Michelle Bachelet](#) [37] - perhaps with Argentina's [Nestór Kirchner](#) [37] thrown in as a creative troublemaker - there is still the doubt as to whether the Latin American public would take any of it seriously. Underneath the spread of Chávez's Bolivarian idyll to four countries (excluding Cuba), there is a popular realisation, dating from the Argentine crisis of 2001, that rightwing populists' carefree assurances of an imminent and steep decline in [poverty rates](#) [38] were not to be taken seriously. In fact, absolutely every Latin politician now makes poverty reduction a top pledge. Weeks before he was brought to power in a coup led by media moguls, disaffected generals and business tycoons Pedro Carmona, the one-day [president](#) [39] of Venezuela in April 2002, declared the "overcoming of poverty" to be the guiding light of his political strategy .

With neither traditional alliances nor a progressive front offering strong diplomatic anchor for the United States in Latin America, with [China](#) [39] and [Iran](#) [40] roaming free across the backyard, these are tough times. One last resort is already being installed: in April 2006, then US national-intelligence director [John Negroponte](#) [41]) told *Time* magazine in April 2006 that the US's spying presence was being built up in Africa and Latin America. Chávez's fixation with an assassination plots against him are quite possibly justified.

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