

A Legacy of Mixed Messages, by Jorge I. Domínguez

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The rise of center-left governments in Latin America has been a dimension of the region's democratization that, notwithstanding setbacks, has been under way for the past quarter century. Center-left parties in many Latin American countries redefined their programs and strategies, competed for voter support, and won free and fair competitive elections.

In 1973, the US government welcomed the military coup that overthrew Chile's Socialist president, Salvador Allende. Chile's current president, Ricardo Lagos, is also a Socialist, though his policies resemble those of Prime Minister Tony Blair's government in the United Kingdom. The Bush administration is proud of its signing a free trade agreement with the Lagos administration.

Brazil's key left politician has been Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, founder of the Workers' Party (PT) and its only presidential contender since dictatorship ended in 1985. Various US administrations viewed Lula with worry. Lula and the PT, too, are committed democrats. They discovered market-oriented policies to grow the economy and break up the economic privileges inherited from dictatorship. Yet the fear of Lula's possible victory in 2002 threatened a financial panic. The US government played a constructive role, supporting an agreement between the International Monetary Fund and the Brazilian government and opposition. It was the first IMF stabilization agreement to be negotiated through a government but mainly with the leading opposition candidate. That agreement allowed the left, also for the first time, to win the presidency. Most of the Lula government's macroeconomic policies have been exemplary.

At US request, President Lula's government leads the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti and contributes the largest contingent of troops. The center-left governments of Argentina and Chile are the next-largest contributors of troops.

In El Salvador, the insurgents (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) who fought the Salvadoran military to a stalemate signed a peace agreement in 1992 and turned their organization into a political party. The FMLN changed its ideology less than the Chilean Socialists or the Brazilian PT, but it now focuses on ballots, not bullets. It is the largest party in the Salvadoran parliament. President George H. W. Bush's administration supported the 1992 peace agreement, even though neither he nor his successors have been FMLN fans.

Not everything has gone so well, however, between the United States and Latin America. Every Brazilian administration has wanted the United States to believe its own free market rhetoric: Stop massively subsidizing US agriculture if it wants international free trade agreements. Central Americans of all ideological colors resent the US refusal to fully dismantle sugar subsidies under the new Central American Free Trade Agreement.

As UN Security Council members in 2003, center-left Chile and center-right Mexico spoke for most Latin Americans in refusing to support the US government's decision to go to war in Iraq, and most Latin American governments oppose US policies toward Cuba. Consider one of the

Bush administration's closest allies in Latin America: Colombia. President Alvaro Uribe works with Fidel Castro to reach a peace agreement with the second largest insurgent group in Colombia, the National Liberation Army (ELN).

The US problems are just with a part of the left. Relations with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales are poor. The Bush administration is not responsible for Chávez's views or rise, but it needlessly made a difficult situation worse and contributed to Chávez's appeal and consolidation of autocratic power. The US government handled Chávez professionally and effectively from late 1998 to 2001. In April 2002, the Bush administration ineptly cast itself as a supporter of a coup to overthrow Chávez. He has not forgotten or forgiven.

The Bush administration is not responsible for Evo Morales's career as the leader of coca growers, but it contributed to his electoral rise. During the last Bolivian presidential campaign in 2002, the US ambassador publicly denounced Morales's opposition presidential candidacy. Morales's popularity surged, putting him within a whisker of winning the presidency. The Bush administration's support for President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was inadequate. Facing a budget shortfall and manifold protests, some led by Morales, Sánchez de Lozada asked for US support; he received a pittance. Months later, he had to resign, setting off events that culminated in Morales' presidential election landslide.

The Bush administration demonstrated during its first term its capacity to make a bad situation worse in relations with Venezuela and Bolivia even as it learned to cooperate with center-left governments in Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. Latin America's democratic governments ask the United States to be credible, not just rhetorical, in its international support for democracy and free trade and to stop the self-defeating policies that led to confrontation with Chávez and Morales. Latin America's democratic left does not threaten the United States, and in many ways it advances US interests and values. Like many left or right democrats the world over, Latin America's await US policies that make better sense.

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