

A View From Latin America

By Jorge I. Domínguez

Latin Americans giggle or moan when they hear Washington apologists for the Bush administration sing the praises of the American empire. They've heard it all before. For them, Pax Americana is not exactly a foreign policy innovation. Nicaraguans, Panamanians, Dominicans, Cubans, and Haitians stand ready to tutor the French about how to live with and complain about the American empire. They can clue in the rest of the world on the not-so-subtle meanings of more than a century of U.S. military preemptive strategies toward foe—and friend. The anthem of the U.S. Marines gets it right: It all began with the “Halls of Montezuma.”

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Afghanistan? Yesterday's war. Unresolved, neglected, needy, but *booring*. Nicaraguans have much to teach the cabal in Kabul about how the United States forgets its nice rhetoric and apparent commitments to its erstwhile allies. Other Central Americans, to a lesser extent, have had similar experiences. For many of them, the principal problem regarding the U.S. empire is not its might but its amnesia.

Love in the Time of Cholera is not just the anglicized title of a wonderful novel by Gabriel García Márquez; it's also a crisp summary of Mexican President Vicente Fox's unrequited love for President George W. Bush. The romance had a promising start, as Fox compelled the U.S. government to finally begin negotiating about the free movement of peoples in North America. But as Fox plucks petals from a daisy—Bush loves me, Bush loves me not—he watches his administration's once glittering accomplishment fade

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fast on the horizon of a flickering Texas sunset.

Bush got an MBA from the Harvard Business School, which apparently taught him to appoint a strange collage of people to work for him. There is U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, who has reactivated the U.S. government's engagement in trade negotiations worldwide and with Latin America in particular. A free-trade agreement between the United States and Chile had languished for years; now it will soon be signed. Central Americans had been pining to start negotiations on their own free-trade agreement with the United States; at long last these talks have begun. Progress continues on the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, while the administration continues to work on the Doha round of the World Trade Organization. Impressive.

Then there is Otto Reich, the almost assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. His 15 minutes of fame came in April 2002, when it appeared that a military coup was imminent in Venezuela. Problem: Hugo Chávez is the constitutional president of Venezuela. What should almost Assistant Secretary Reich have done? Should he have rallied to the defense of constitutional democracy as the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations

had done? Should he have helped topple Chávez? He chose to do all of the above, simultaneously encouraging mass demonstrations against Chávez and declaring support for constitutional democracy in Venezuela. And then, to top it all off, the Bush administration blamed Chávez for bringing the attempted coup upon himself. Such befuddled policies help to explain why Reich is now the former almost assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

Latin America looked upon the George W. Bush administration as a dream come true. The president seemed committed to strengthening U.S.–Latin American relations—from Mexico to Chile and everywhere else in between. He had promised to “look south, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental commitment of my presidency.” But the Yale University class of 1968 had no geography requirement for graduation, and Bush has looked east and west, not south. Alas, Latin America is again experiencing the downside of a well-known cycle in U.S. policy toward the region: after the high rhetoric, comes neglect.