

Bush's Foreign Policy in Latin America: Colombia and U.S. Drug Policy

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The Latin American region received little attention during either the presidential campaign or in the press coverage of the incoming administration.

But in fact, while Latin America may be off the maps of key political pundits, the Bush administration faces immediate and extremely important policy challenges that will shape U.S.-Latin American relations over the course of President Bush's tenure in the White House.

President Bush himself has put Mexico at the top of his foreign policy agenda in announcing his upcoming visit with President Vicente Fox. The timing of this trip to Mexico could indeed be a bit uncomfortable, as immediately thereafter his administration will have to announce the annual certification decisions. By March 1, the president has to produce its review of the drug control efforts of major drug-producing and -trafficking countries. The new administration may not recall the hostility provoked amongst our Latin American neighbors (and Mexico in particular) by this annual charade.

In addition, U.S. policy toward Colombia will once again become the center of the foreign aid debate on Capitol Hill when the president's fiscal year 2002 budget is presented. The new foreign policy team will have to decide whether it will stay the course with a multi-year commitment to waging war in Colombia or whether it will put its own stamp on this complex policy dilemma.

Finally, the Americas Summit of hemispheric leaders in April is rapidly approaching. Although Colombia is not specifically on the agenda, it will likely dominate the private discussions taking place. President Bush may have

trouble keeping attention at the summit on his free trade agenda.

So what can we expect from the incoming administration as it faces these immediate policy decisions?

First, it's important to point out that the foreign policy team assembled by President Bush has very little Latin America experience, with the one exception of Robert Zoellick who was named U.S. Trade Representative. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld as much as admitted his lack of knowledge of Colombia during his confirmation hearings, and expressed surprise that the U.S. has a military facility in Manta, Ecuador.

The members of the new foreign policy team are certainly smart, but they have been shaped by a cold war mentality that reflects how the world looked over a decade ago. Given most Latin Americans' experience with U.S. policy during that time period, this gives some cause for alarm.

Second, we can look at what was said during the campaign. Bush criticized the Clinton administration for paying too little attention to the Americas, focused on free trade issues, supported Plan Colombia and the drug war, and expressed his personal affinity with Mexico for obvious reasons. That would indicate that Latin America would be higher on the Bush administration agenda, promoting free trade and U.S. business interests will be front and center and, clearly, special attention will be paid to Mexico. It would also indicate that policy shifts regarding Colombia and the drug war are unlikely.

Third, we can look at the track record of the first Bush administration. Here, we get mixed



clues. The first President Bush revealed its interventionist instincts in its invasion of Panama and to a large extent, gave us the drug war—launching the Andean Initiative in September 1989. However, in other areas it showed a less ideological approach than the Reagan administration, such as in its more collaborative and bipartisan approach to Central America.

Two other unknown factors must be thrown into the policy mix. First, we are still waiting to see who will be named to various mid-level positions—beyond Ambassador John Maisto, who will be going over to the National Security Council. And there is the looming issue of Katherine Harris, who played a key role in securing Bush's Florida "victory." Harris is rumored to be slated for the position of special envoy to the Americas. Not only would such a move irk more than a few folks in Washington, it would cause quite a few snickers the next time the U.S. attempts to monitor a Latin American election.

Finally, the role of the Republican Congress will be key. There are many hardliners chomping at the bit to push through their conservative agendas with an ally in the White House.

Taking these variables into account, we could largely expect continuity in policies toward Colombia and the drug war more broadly—though there is still some room for optimism that new strategies will be pursued.

Looking specifically at drug policy, in both of their confirmation hearings, Rumsfeld and Powell pointed to the need to look inward, at domestic policies, for addressing the nation's drug problem. Although this did not come out in the hearings, the war on drugs clearly does not fit the criteria

of the "Powell doctrine" for U.S. military engagement abroad. Rumsfeld was more direct, stating: "I am one who believes that the drug problem is overwhelmingly a demand problem." This leaves open the possibility that, despite Bush's campaign rhetoric, the new administration may finally move to dismantle the misguided and failed international drug control policy currently in place.

On Colombia, the administration is inheriting a foreign policy nightmare. The Clinton administration has embarked on a militarized strategy that threatens to further exacerbate Colombia's deep-rooted problems of political violence and undermine faltering efforts to secure peace.

During the campaign, Bush adviser Robert Zoellick gave a major policy speech in which he clearly stated that the U.S. should move beyond the counternarcotics rhetoric of the Clinton administration's Colombia policy and embrace the counterinsurgency mission. While avoiding specifics, Secretary of State Powell indicated his support of Plan Colombia in his confirmation hearings and implied that more military aid to Colombia's neighbors may be forthcoming. From a Republican point of view, Colombia could easily fall into the national security paradigm put forth by Condoleezza Rice.

On the other hand, the Colombia quagmire does not appear to meet the criteria laid out in the infamous "Powell Doctrine." Our political objectives in Colombia are, at least to date, murky. Our national interests are not clear. And there is no exit strategy. All of which would argue for military disengagement from Colombia.

In conclusion, there are three measures that the new Bush adminis-

tration can adopt to move U.S. policy toward Latin America in a more positive direction.

First, Colombia provides a perfect opportunity to put the "Powell doctrine" into practice. The FY 2002 budget should dramatically reduce U.S. military aid to that country and the U.S. military should be pulled out.

Second, President Bush should take advantage of his trip to Mexico to announce that he will support efforts by Senator Dodd and others to repeal the certification process as soon as possible. The administration should explicitly avoid a potential two-track policy, as some are suggesting, by extending such a measure only to Mexico. The certification process is ineffective and offensive and should go.

Finally, most reasonable people agree that present international drug control policies are a total, absolute, and unequivocal failure. The new administration should follow up on the statements made by its top officials and refocus drug policy where it belongs—here at home. Maybe, just maybe, it takes a conservative, Republican administration to move this policy in a more productive direction.

(This commentary by Coletta Youngers

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