

What Can Obama Do in Latin America?

by **GREG GRANDIN**

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What if Barack Obama had picked *The Nation's* Katrina vanden Heuvel or *Democracy Now!* anchor Amy Goodman to advise him at the upcoming Summit of seventy-five years ago President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did something just like that, tapping a former *Nation* editor and fierce critic of US militarism to advise his administration on Latin American policy. As a result--consider this your curious, yet little known, fact of the day--anti-imperialism saved the American empire.

FDR took office in 1933 looking not just to stabilize the US economy but to calm a world inflamed: Japan had invaded Manchuria the year before; the Nazis had seized power in Germany; European imperialists were tightening their holds over their colonies; and the Soviet Union had declared its militant "third period" strategy, imagining that global capitalism, plunged into the Great Depression, was in its last throes.

When, soon after his March inauguration, Roosevelt put forward a call to the "nations of the world" to "enter into a solemn and definitive pact of non-aggression," the colonialists, militarists and fascists who ruled Europe and Asia balked. Because the new president's global reach came nowhere near his global ambitions, the London Economic Conference--convened that July by the equivalent of today's G-20--broke up rancorously over how to respond to that moment's global meltdown.

Luckily for Roosevelt, the seventh Pan-American Conference was scheduled to take place that December in Montevideo, Uruguay. Admittedly the very idea of pan-Americanism--that the American republics shared common ideals and political interests--was then moribund. Every few years, in an international forum, Latin American delegates simply submitted to Washington's directives while silently seething about the latest US military intervention--in Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Venezuela, Honduras, the Dominican Republic or Haiti. (Take your pick.)

Momentum was then building among Latin American nations for a revision of international law, which effectively granted great powers the right to intervene in the affairs of smaller republics. Venezuelan diplomats, for instance, were insisting that the US affirm the principle of absolute sovereignty. Argentines put forth their own "non-aggression" treaty codifying non-intervention as the law of the hemisphere. Caribbean and Central American politicians insisted that detachments of US Marines, then bogged down in counterinsurgencies in Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, get out.

FDR dispatched his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to the summit, but instructed him not to offer anything more than a promise to build a few new roads. The demand that the United States give up the right of intervention was "unacceptable."

Yet Roosevelt, who had a way of mixing and matching unlikely advisors, also asked Ernest Gruening

(recommended by Harvard law professor and soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter) to accompany Hull. In 1964, as a senator from Alaska, Gruening would become famous for casting one of only two votes against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which President Lyndon Johnson would use to escalate the Vietnam War, but in the 1930s, he was already a committed anti-imperialist.

In the pages of the *Nation* and other left-wing journals, he had helped expose the use of torture, forced labor and political assassinations that took place under Marine occupations in the Caribbean, atrocities he likened to European brutality in India, Ireland and the Congo. After touring Haiti and the Dominican Republic, he lobbied Congress to cut off the funding of counterinsurgency operations in the region, and he excoriated the "horde of carpet-bagging concessionaires that are the camp-followers of American militaristic imperialism." That such an uncompromising critic of US diplomacy would be chosen to advise the Secretary of State reflects the strength of the left in the 1930s--and Roosevelt's willingness to tap it.

Burnin' and Murdewin'

As the delegation set sail for Montevideo, Gruening was shocked to learn that the US had "no program except to be friendly with everyone and radiate goodwill."

"Mr. Secretary," he reported himself telling Hull, "the one issue that concerns every Latin-American country is intervention. We should come out strongly for a resolution abjuring it."

Hull, whom Gruening later described as speaking in the thick accent of a born and bred member of the Tennessee gentry, dropping g's and wrestling with r's, replied that that would be a hard sell.

"What am Ah goin't to do when chaos breaks out in one of those countries and armed bands go woamin' awound, burnin', pillagin' and murdewin' Amewicans?" Hull asked. "How can I tell mah people that we cain't intervene?"

"Mr. Secretary," Gruening responded "that usually happens *after* we have intervened."

Hull was, however, afraid of bad press. "If Ah were to come out against intervention," he said, "the Hearst papers would attack me fwom coast to coast.... Wemember, Gwuening, Mr. Woosevelt and Ah have to be weelected."

"Coming out against intervention would help you get reelected," Gruening replied. It would, he insisted, help the New Deal jump off the merry-go-round of invasion, occupation and insurgency that had badly crippled US prestige throughout Latin America and much of the world.

He was right. In Montevideo, Gruening helped bridge the gap between US envoys and "anti-American" Latin American diplomats, including those from Cuba where, well before Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, serial US interventions had strained relations between Havana and Washington. Most importantly, he reconciled the Secretary of State to the principle of non-intervention.

Hull "rose to the occasion magnificently," Gruening wrote, announcing that the United States would henceforth "shun and reject" the "so-called right-of-conquest.... The New Deal indeed would be an empty boast if it did not mean that." Latin American delegates broke out in "thunderous applause and cheers." And FDR, ever the agile politician, seized the moment, confirming that the "definite policy of the United States from now on is one opposed to armed intervention."

"Our Era of 'Imperialism' Nears its End," the *New York Times* announced. " 'Manifest Destiny' Is Giving Way to the New Policy of 'Equal Dealing With All Nations.' "

Twenty-One Different Kinds of Hate

Not quite, of course. Washington would return to a policy of interventionism in the cold war era. Nonetheless, the importance of this diplomatic sea-change cannot be overstated.

Montevideo was Roosevelt's first significant foreign policy success, marking a turn in the country's fortunes as an ascendant superpower. He then ordered the Marines to withdraw from Haiti, while giving the country back its national bank; he abrogated the Cuban constitution's hated Platt Amendment, which had turned the island into a US vassal-state; and he began to tolerate a degree of economic nationalism in Latin America, including Mexico's expropriation of the holdings of Standard Oil.

FDR's enormous popularity in Latin America fired his aspirations to world leadership. Visiting Buenos Aires in 1936, he was greeted by more than a million ecstatic well-wishers who gave him a "wild ovation" and "pelted him with flowers." Even Buenos Aires's usually skeptical press heralded him as a "shepherd of democracy," while hospitals expected an "enormous crop of 'Roosevelts among baby boys," despite a ban on foreign names for infants.

Improved relations with Latin America also helped the US recover from the Great Depression. With Asia off limits and Europe headed for war, Washington looked south both for markets for manufactured goods and for raw materials, negotiating trade treaties with fifteen Latin American countries between 1934 and 1942.

More importantly, Latin America became the laboratory for what eventually became known as liberal multilateralism--the diplomatic framework that, after World War II, would allow the United States to accrue unprecedented power. With the League of Nations practically defunct, diplomats began to discuss the possibility of a new "League of the Americas," which would eventually evolve into both the Organization of American States and the United Nations. (Each would enshrine in its charter the principle of absolute nonintervention.) Roosevelt himself would hold up the "illustration of the republics of this continent" as a model for global postwar reconstruction.

Cordell Hull got the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to found the UN and FDR took credit for overcoming "many times twenty-one different kinds of hate" to "sell the idea of peace and security among the American republics." But the thanks really should go to anti-imperialists like Gruening and guerrilla fighters like Nicaragua's Augusto Sandino who rendered militarism an unsustainable foreign policy.

Seventy-Five Years Later...

The parallels with today are unmistakable: a global economy in tatters; a new president with a mandate for reform, but blocked abroad by rising rivals and hamstrung by the rapid recession of US power and prestige thanks to years of arrogant, unilateral militarism. And coming on the heels of a London summit of economic powers, a Latin American conference: the Fifth Summit of the Americas to be attended by thirty-four heads of state representing every American country except Cuba.

The last time this summit convened at the Argentinean beach resort town of Mar del Plata in 2005, Argentines greeted George W. Bush not as a shepherd of democracy but as an evangelizer for war,

militarism and savage capitalism. Thousands turned up from all over the continent to burn the president in effigy. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales convened a festive parallel "People's Summit," while Argentine soccer legend Maradona called Bush "human rubbish" and "a bit of an assassin." To paraphrase Michael Moore's Academy Award homage to the Dixie Chicks, when Maradona is against you, your time in Latin America is up.

With an aircraft carrier stationed just offshore and fighter jets buzzing overhead, Bush still was nervous and seemed distinctly out of his league. Coming just a few months after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, with Iraq careening out of control, Bush's disastrous performance in Argentina, combined with an impressive display of Latin American unity, hastened the demise of the pretension of the neoconservatives to global supremacy. "The United States continues to see things one way," said one Latin American diplomat at the summit, "but most of the rest of the hemisphere has moved on and is heading in another direction."

And so it had, with a left turn that started with Chávez's 1998 election as Venezuela's president and still continues apace. Last year, after all, Paraguay elected a liberation theologian as president; and last month, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front--the guerrilla-group-turned-political party Ronald Reagan spent \$6 billion and 70,000 Salvadorean lives trying to defeat in the 1980s--finally came to power in El Salvador.

This week many will be watching to see if Barack Obama, in what will be his first real engagement with Latin America, is ready to reverse course at this summit as Roosevelt did more than three-quarters of a century ago. To the United States, Latin America has not just been a source of raw materials and markets, but a "**workshop**," a place where rising foreign-policy coalitions try out new ways to project US power following periods of acute crisis. FDR did it, as did Reagan and the New Right when, in the 1980s, they used Central America to experiment with junking multilateralism, while remilitarizing and remoralizing foreign policy.

Today, President Obama is enormously popular in Latin America. A number of local politicians in the region even legally **adopted** his name to give themselves an edge on ballots, and undoubtedly quite a few baby boys will be called Barack. Brazil's president, known simply as Lula, says he is praying for Obama--and even Maradona **admits** he likes him "a lot."

But popularity only goes so far. For the first time in many decades, an American president might find that the days when the US could use Latin America as an imperial rehearsal space are drawing to a close.

The Colombian Option

So what will Obama offer in Trinidad and Tobago? He will, like Hull in 1933, be intent on "radiating goodwill," but he will not necessarily "be friendly with everyone." He's already poisoned the water by insisting that Hugo Chávez is an "obstacle" to progress. Love Chávez or hate him, he is recognized as a legitimate leader by all Latin American countries and is a close ally to many. For eight years, a Bush administration policy of driving a wedge between the rest of the region and the Venezuelan proved a dismal failure, except when it came to increasing the outflow of Washington's hemorrhaging power in the hemisphere.

On many fronts, however, the president is likely to discover that his real obstacles to progress south of the border lie uncomfortably close to home.

In preparation for the summit, the Obama administration has made some overtures to Cuba, responding to demands by nearly every Latin American country that Washington end its cold war against Havana. The need to **keep** Democratic senators from Florida and New Jersey (states with large Cuban-American populations) in the fold means that the general travel ban and trade embargo will, however, stay in place, at least for now. (In 1933, Hull tried to prevent the Cuban envoy from speaking, fearing that he would give a fiery anti-American speech; Gruening appealed to the principle of free speech to reverse the ban.)

Obama will probably reiterate recent official **statements** by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, among others, that the United States bears real responsibility for Mexico's drug-war violence and perhaps bemoan the way an "inability to prevent weapons from being illegally smuggled across the border" fuels drug-related killings. Like every other administration, though, Obama's will have to answer to the National Rifle Association (NRA), which at this point carries out its own foreign policy.

In 2005, for example, when Brazil held a referendum to implement a stringent gun-control law, the NRA **spent considerable money** lobbying to successfully defeat it. So expect the NRA to fight any attempt to stem the flow of guns south of the border. In fact, Wyoming senator John Barrasso hopes to use the fear of Mexican drug violence to force a greater distribution of assault weapons. As he **put the matter**, "Why would you disarm someone when they potentially could get caught in the crossfire?... The United States will not surrender our Second Amendment rights for Mexico's border problem."

And so it goes: On nearly every issue that could either actually help relieve the suffering of Latin Americans or allow the US to win back strategic allies, domestic politics will hinder Obama's range of action, even if not his immediate popularity.

Just recently, a study group made up of some of Latin America's leading intellectuals and policy-makers, including former presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, **declared** the US war on drugs a failure and recommended the legalization of marijuana. Obama is obviously sympathetic to this position, having instructed his Justice Department to back off "medical marijuana" prosecutions. But will he be able to de-escalate the war on drugs in Latin America? Not likely.

As a candidate, the president did say he wasn't opposed to all wars, just stupid ones--and this one is as stupid as they come. It hasn't lessened narcotics exports to the United States, but has spread violence through Central America into Mexico, while entrenching paramilitary power in Colombia. Plan Colombia, the centerpiece of that war, is a legacy of Bill Clinton's foreign policy, and much of the \$6 billion so far spent to fight it has essentially been **direct-deposited** in the coffers of corporate sponsors of the Democratic Party like Connecticut's United Technologies and other Northeastern defense contractors.

Rather than dismantling Plan Colombia, **plans are evidently afoot** to have it go viral beyond the Americas. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently **commented** that "many of us from all over the world can learn from what has happened with respect to the very successful developments of Plan Colombia," and suggested that it be franchised "specifically to Afghanistan." *Washington Post* White House correspondent Scott Wilson **agrees**, urging Obama to use Colombia as a "classroom for learning how to beat the Taliban." Buried deep in Wilson's recommendation was a revelation: US officials, he wrote, "privately" told him that death-squad terror was a necessary first step in Plan Colombia, serving as a "placeholder" until the US could train a "professional" army. The Bush administration kept "the money flowing to Colombia's army despite evidence of its complicity in paramilitary massacres."

The Path to Latin America Runs Through Brasilia...

Ultimately, imperial Washington's only real road may run through the Brazilian capital, Brasilia. After all, Obama approaches the region not as a leader of a confident superpower but of an autumnal hegemon. As such, his best option may lie in forming a partnership with Brazil--Latin America's largest, most diversified economy, with enormous, newly discovered offshore oil reserves and a fulsome set of political aspirations--to administer the hemisphere. The White House clearly recognizes this to be the case, which was why an administration official called Lula's recent one-on-one meeting in Washington with Obama a recognition of Brazil's "global ascendancy."

Just before the G-20 meeting convened in London, Lula **blamed** the global financial collapse on the "irrational behavior of people that are white" and "blue-eyed." Standing next to the blanching British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, he continued: "I do not know any black or indigenous bankers so I can only say [it is wrong] that this part of mankind, which is victimized more than any other, should pay for the crisis."

If these words came out of Chávez's mouth, they would have been taken as but the latest indication of his irrational anti-Americanism, but the Obama administration needs Lula. In London, Obama could barely contain himself: "That's my man right here," he said, **grabbing** Lula's hand as Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner looked on. "Love this guy. He's the most popular politician on earth. It's because of his good looks." That certainly represented an improvement over George Bush, who asked Lula's Brazilian predecessor, "Do you have blacks, too?"

Yet Brazil's cooperation will come at a price, which Obama will have trouble meeting. This country's baroque and bloated farm subsidy and tariff program--which House and Senate members recently **refused** to let Obama cut--will prevent the president from bowing gracefully to Lula's central demand: that the US live up to its rhetoric about free trade and open its economy to Brazil's competitive agro-industry.

...Around Caracas...

And then there's Venezuela. Seventy-five years ago, Secretary of State Hull feared the Hearst papers would attack him "from coast to coast" if he renounced interventionism. Well, the more things change...

When Obama's State Department declared Venezuela's recent referendum to remove presidential term limits (and so allow Chávez to stand for re-election) an internal matter "consistent with democratic principles," it was **attacked** by the *Houston Chronicle*, which is **owned**-- you guessed it--by the Hearst Corporation. More criticism followed, sending administration officials "scrambling," **according to** the *Wall Street Journal*, "to assert that the Obama administration hasn't softened US policy toward Venezuela."

Since the ongoing **demonization of Chávez** carries absolutely no domestic costs and its easing plenty of potential debits, Obama might be forced to keep up some version of the Bush administration's hard line, perhaps providing the president cover to moderate rhetoric, if not policy, in real danger spots where far more is at stake--as in the Middle East.

...And Ends in Texas

Immigration is one area where Obama might have some room to maneuver, but he would have to overcome the Glenn-Beck wing of the Republican Party. Ordering Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to stop hunting undocumented Latin American workers (as the presidents of Mexico and Central America have **demand**) and **opening** a real path to citizenship would go a long way toward improving relations with southern neighbors. It would also guarantee the loyalty of the Latino vote in 2012 and, by creating millions of new voters, perhaps even pull Texas closer to swing-state status.

Returning to the Scene of the Crime

Ultimately, however, Obama's vision will be limited by the smallness of the imaginations of the counselors he has surrounded himself with. There are neither Gruenings nor even Hulls in that crowd. He has kept on George W. Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America Thomas Shannon and has picked Jeffrey Davidow to be his special advisor at the summit.

A career diplomat, Davidow's foreign service has been largely unremarkable, though his first **posting** was to Guatemala in the early 1970s when US-backed death squads were running wild, and was followed by an assignment as a junior political officer in Chile, where he observed the 1973 US-backed military coup that overthrew elected President Salvador Allende. Committed to the Clinton-era mantra of economic liberalization, these diplomats will never recommend the kind of game-changing ideas Gruening did.

Given that the global financial crisis will dominate this summit, Obama's appearance will be seen by some as a return to the scene of the crime. After all, it was in Chile that the now-discredited model of deregulated financial capitalism was first imposed. This occurred well before Presidents Reagan and Clinton adopted it in the United States.

As it then spread through most of the rest of Latin America, the results were absolutely disastrous. For two decades, economies **stagnated**, poverty deepened and inequality increased. To make matters worse, just as a new generation of leftists, taking measures to lessen poverty and reduce inequality, was recovering from that Washington-induced catastrophe, a reckless housing bubble burst in the United States, bringing down the global economy.

Latin Americans will want an accounting. As even Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a close US ally, **put it**, "the whole world has financed the United States, and I believe that they have a reciprocal debt with the planet." Hugo Chávez couldn't have said it better.

About Greg Grandin

Greg Grandin teaches at New York University and is the author of *Empire's Workshop*. His new book, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (Metropolitan), will be published in June. **more...**

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