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## A Shaken Agenda: Bush and Latin America

MICHAEL SHIFTER

The September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. starkly revealed the vast power differentials that have long characterized Western Hemisphere relations. To some extent, the tensions and suspicions inherent in these asymmetries had been obscured since the end of the cold war by the convergence between the United States and Latin America in the organization of their politics and the management of their economies. The common path marked by greater harmony and cooperation was symbolized by the three summits the hemisphere's elected heads of state held in less than eight years (prior to 1994, the last such summit took place in 1967).

To be sure, in the early 1990s some might have been guilty of wishful thinking when they described the hemisphere's outlook as optimistic. And certainly, since the mid-1990s—and long before September 11, 2001—increasingly troubling signs could be discerned on Latin America's political and economic landscape, accompanied by some strain in inter-American affairs. Moreover, the New York and Washington strikes laid bare the multifaceted, ambivalent attitudes of Latin Americans toward the United States. The sheer magnitude and profound psychological impact of the attacks evoked a Manichaeian “you're either with us or against us” formulation on the part of the Bush administration—broadly backed by United

States public opinion—that left many Latin Americans uneasy.

Perennial questions in inter-American relations emerged more sharply than ever after September 11: Would the United States turn its attention away from Latin America and consign the region to irrelevance? Would the United States resort to a style reminiscent of the cold war years and attempt to impose a broad strategic design, in accord with its global antiterrorist campaign? Or would the United States take advantage of this moment and engage more proactively and constructively with its Latin American partners in pursuit of a shared agenda?

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Although before September 11 Latin America could hardly be characterized as a high priority for the United States, the new Bush administration's approach or attitude toward the region was, at the very least, unusually tantalizing. President George W. Bush's Texas origins, his manifest affinity with Mexico, and his rapport with its new leader, President Vicente Fox, appeared to augur more serious and sustained engagement with Latin America. Bush could boast that in his first six months in office he had met with seven of the hemisphere's heads of state, and had participated in the third hemispheric summit, held in Quebec in April 2001.

Yet, from the outset of the Bush administration, Mexico clearly was one thing—and Latin America quite another. Fox was poised to get special treatment, and did so, when he became the first foreign leader Bush met with after becoming president. In

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Washington, Fox proved to be the consummate salesman, winning over key constituencies of the United States political establishment, capped by a remarkably successful address to a joint session of Congress on September 6. At the White House, Bush proclaimed that Mexico was “our most important relationship.” The Mexican government’s bold proposals on immigration and drugs found greater receptivity in a city utterly taken with Fox’s ability to sweep aside seven decades of single-party authoritarian rule.

Fox returned to Mexico on September 7. At least in the short term, perhaps no other country in the world was as deflated by the new reconfiguration brought about by September 11. The incident appeared to reset traditional patterns of United States relations with the rest of the world. British Prime Minister Tony Blair quickly assumed center stage, dramatically illustrated by his prominent place in Bush’s address to Congress on September 20. In a flash, Blair appeared to supplant Fox as America’s closest friend. For many Latin Americans, such symbolism suggested that even the good feelings generated between the Bush and Fox administrations were perhaps more hollow or fleeting than they had appeared. In a moment of crisis, it seemed the United States would once again turn to the countries it considered its historic and more reliable allies.

The Latin American reaction to September 11 was not surprising. Expressions of outrage and solidarity with the American people and the United States were uniform: even Cuba offered its assistance in seizing those responsible for the attacks. At sessions called by the Organization of American States on September 21, the hemisphere’s foreign ministers unanimously adopted two resolutions of support. One fell under the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the so-called Rio Treaty of 1947), which essentially stated that an attack on one country should be considered an attack against all countries of the hemisphere. The move to invoke the Rio Treaty, which many had regarded as moribund, was spearheaded by Brazil. (During his visit to Washington, in what proved infelicitous timing, Fox, speaking at the OAS, had called the treaty obsolete and urged a reformulation of a hemispheric security concept.)

Yet Latin America’s reaction to September 11 was far from unconditional. The initial communiqué

issued by the Fox administration, for example, warned against unilateral actions. Even before United States military activity began in Afghanistan, questions about sovereignty, historically sensitive throughout Latin America, came to the fore. In a speech in Paris on October 30, Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso set a tone at odds with the Bush and Blair line by emphasizing the underlying conditions of injustice and poverty that can help give rise to terrorist incidents. Statements like these by Fox and Cardoso, along with those by other Latin American administrations, reflect to some extent prevailing public opinion throughout the region. In Latin America, survey after survey has evinced considerable nervousness about the propensity of the United States to use force in a unilateral fashion. The war in Afghanistan underlined the dilemma Latin Americans have long wrestled with: how to press for United States support and cooperation but resist intervention.

In contrast to the more nuanced and measured statements coming from Mexico and Brazil, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez issued more primitive and classically anti-American remarks. United States officials were irritated when Chávez advisers questioned whether there was proof

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that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the terror attacks and, in a peculiar word game, refused to acknowledge that Venezuelan “Carlos the Jackal,” who is serving a life sentence for staging several terrorist attacks in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, was a terrorist because he had been convicted in a French, not Venezuelan, court. Chávez’s comparison of United States military actions in Afghanistan against bin Laden and the Taliban government with the September 11 terrorist attacks provoked the sharpest rupture in years between the two countries, with the United States recalling its ambassador for consultations. The United States policy toward Venezuela that had been in place since 1999—paying attention not so much to what Chávez says, but rather to what he does—began to reach its limit.

Perhaps most crucially, September 11 took place against the backdrop of a highly unsettled region, heightened by profound crises in Latin America’s third and fourth most populous countries. During 2001, the security situation in Colombia continued to deteriorate. President Andrés Pastrana’s peace effort hung by a thread, and the country seemed to edge toward an all-out civil war. On December 19,

for the first time in a dozen years, Argentina was under a state of siege, prompted by social unrest and an eruption of violence. With President Fernando de la Rúa's forced resignation and the country nearly paralyzed, the new caretaker government defaulted on its substantial debt, which could have huge economic and political repercussions. Looking toward 2002, neither crisis showed any sign of abating. And both posed formidable challenges and appeared bound to force major policy decisions for the United States.

### FAST TRACK TO WHERE?

Even before September 11, Latin America's economic situation was critical. To some degree the gloomy outlook can be attributed to the American economy's slowdown in 2001. Since the United States and Mexican economies are so closely intertwined—roughly 90 percent of Mexico's exports go to the United States—Mexico has been particularly hard hit by the recession in the United States. Mexico's economy, which had been projected to grow at roughly 5 percent in 2001, was essentially stagnant.

Beyond Mexico and Argentina, the economic picture throughout the rest of Latin America was not much brighter. Along with the United States, the stalled economies in Europe and Asia have negatively affected such countries as Brazil, and even once-booming Chile. In addition, the sharp drop in commodity prices such as coffee has badly hurt many of the region's economies, especially in Colombia and Central America. Natural disasters—a combination of droughts and hurricanes—have substantially impeded development in several Central American and Caribbean countries.

Enrique Iglesias, president of the Inter-American Development Bank, remarked in October 2001 that Latin America faces its most difficult years in decades. Few regional specialists are sanguine about improved economic performance in 2002. In many respects, September 11 has had a negative impact on Latin America's economic outlook, aggravating already worrying tendencies. The drop in tourism, for example, has especially devastated some Caribbean economies, and has affected Mexico and other countries as well. And preliminary indications suggest that the level of remittances sent by Hispanics in the United States to their families—which total an estimated \$20 billion and account for a substantial and growing share of foreign exchange in many countries—has also severely declined. The sectors of the United States economy most affected by the attacks—including

the hospitality, service, and airline industries—employ a heavy concentration of Hispanics.

Acute economic conditions have contributed to pervasive malaise throughout much of the region. Many Latin Americans increasingly see themselves on the losing end of the globalization equation and are searching for fresh recipes for economic development. The United States, after all, is viewed as being the chief beneficiary of the new globalized economy. This widespread perception makes it difficult for Latin America to identify without reservation with the antiterrorism campaign.

The somber mood also has significant political ramifications. For the first time since it was launched in 1995, a comparative survey issued by the Latin American Barometer, which registers public opinion in 17 countries in Latin America, revealed in 2001 a striking correlation between disappointment with economic performance and the level of commitment to democracy as the preferred form of government. Although there is no indication that most Latin Americans have any interest in returning to strongman military rule, the results show that, with continued economic decline and stubborn poverty, their attachment to the democratic system—the system, in common perception, associated with the disappointing economic outcomes—has eroded.

These conditions pose an enormous challenge to the Bush administration, which will find it increasingly difficult to make claims about Latin America's continued faith in market economics and democratic politics. Even the recent passage of trade promotion (or "fast track") authority—the House approved the measure by the barest of margins, 215-214—is instructive in this regard. (Fast-track authority permits the president to negotiate trade agreements without the risk of congressional amendments.) More than anything else, Latin American governments want greater access to United States markets for their products. Although the adoption of trade promotion authority marks a step forward in an effort to lower tariffs, for those committed to free trade the vote can nonetheless be regarded as a Pyrrhic victory at best.

The final bill and accompanying agreements were so laden with special conditions for products such as textiles, sugar, steel, and citrus fruits that it was severely criticized for being a move toward greater protectionism. In notably direct comments, Brazilian President Cardoso said that in its present form the measure would do more to impede than facilitate progress toward a Free Trade Area of the Americas, the presumably widely shared hemispheric

aspiration since 1994. That the Andean Trade Preference Act (an agreement that lowers tariffs on select Andean exports to the United States) was allowed to expire on December 4 underscored heightened protectionism during periods of economic downturn, as well as the difficulty of passing measures even to assist such a troubled set of countries.

Still, despite the closeness of the fast-track vote, the adoption of such a politically contentious and controversial measure sends a positive signal to Latin America. Congress had denied fast-track authority to President Bill Clinton since 1994. That President Bush enjoyed such spectacularly high approval ratings after the attacks—around 90 percent—certainly contributed to the bill's passage. Republican members of Congress who might have otherwise opposed the measure were loath to do so in view of the president's strong standing and at a moment of such intense national concern and unity.

Indeed, the bill's approval can be attributed at least partially to the administration's ability to frame and justify open trade in terms of enhancing national economic security. To some degree, the administration succeeded in portraying the effort as a battle in the wider global war against terrorism. And, of course, this was not the right time to undercut the president.

#### **PLAN COLOMBIA: THE BEST ANTITERRORIST POLICY?**

Concerned about growing neglect and distraction from Washington after September 11, Anne Patterson, the United States ambassador to Colombia, has sought to draw attention to the deteriorating situation in that country. She has invoked terms most likely to resonate with United States politicians primarily concerned about fighting terrorism and protecting national security. In a speech in Cartagena, Colombia on October 25, Patterson stressed that Plan Colombia, a multiyear antidrug effort, was the most effective antiterrorist policy.

Patterson's rhetoric can be understood in the context of the escalation of violence in the Western Hemisphere's continuing war—and the need for an effective United States role to help bring the conflict to an end. Abuses committed by the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the right-wing umbrella paramilitary organization United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—Colombia has 3 of the 28 groups designated as "terrorist" on the United States State Department list—increased during the course of 2001.

Despite some signs of progress in engaging the international community and improving some state institutions (and getting the ELN to agree to a truce at the end of 2001), recent attempts to move toward greater legitimate government authority and control have borne scant fruit. Lawlessness and insecurity remain rampant.

Many members of the United States Congress are puzzled about Colombia, and what United States policy is supposed to accomplish. Since 1998, Colombia has received more United States security assistance than any country outside the Middle East. In July 2000, President Clinton signed a mostly military antidrug aid package of \$1.3 billion, the United States contribution to Plan Colombia. With the proposal of a \$731-million Andean Regional Initiative, the Bush administration has essentially extended the previous effort but provided a greater balance than the original measure in terms of military versus non-military aid and a more even distribution of resources among the neighboring countries. On December 20, the Senate approved the initiative, although it reduced the amount to \$626 million (with \$350 million designated for Colombia).

Still, many are uneasy about the continuing emphasis on fighting drugs—however easy to explain in domestic political terms—and wonder whether the United States should instead focus on Colombia's core internal problems. Although no one in the United States government is recommending disengagement from Colombia, concerns about the policy are mounting, reflected in the constant whittling away at the Bush proposal.

Colin Powell, who was set to make his first visit to Colombia (from Peru) as secretary of state on September 11, has repeatedly expressed support for a political solution to the country's decades-long conflict. It is unclear, however, how the Bush administration would propose to reconcile pressures from some United States officials, after September 11, to highlight Plan Colombia's antiterrorist aims, with efforts to move toward a negotiated settlement in the country. The United States might try to impose a formula that derives from its global antiterrorism campaign, if only to demonstrate that it does not target only Islamic groups. In any case, in the coming period, the United States likely will insist on a firmer approach than that carried out by the Pastrana administration since 1998.

Still, the United States is likely to face a major policy decision regarding Colombia in mid-2002. By that time, the global antiterrorism campaign will presumably be in another phase, and there will have

been time to assess the impact of the United States contribution to Plan Colombia. Most important, in May 2002 Colombians will go to the polls to pick their next president, who will assume office in August. United States policymakers will doubtless take careful measure of the choice of the Colombian electorate and the ideas advanced by the incoming president to move the country to greater peace and security. There is a pervasive sense, both in Bogotá and Washington, that despite the best of intentions, President Pastrana's efforts have been disappointing, which makes it especially important for his successor to implement an alternative strategy.

The role of the United States in Colombia will be closely watched throughout Latin America. Many in the region are worried that the antiterrorist discourse coming from some American officials may well translate into a more interventionist military posture that allows little room for negotiation. Concerns about such single-mindedness by the United States carry echoes of the cold war.

At the same time, few Latin Americans favor United States disengagement from Colombia. President Bush's remarks on April 22, 2001, following the Quebec summit, reveal an unwelcome passivity: "It's going to be up to President Pastrana to make the peace. Once he does so, we'll stand by his side." But it remains to be seen whether the United States will be able to pursue a course other than disengagement or imposing its own solution on Colombia. To date, the United States has resisted applying its diplomatic resources to catalyze a foundering peace process and engage neighboring countries in a common political endeavor.

### GLOBALIZATION ON TRIAL IN ARGENTINA

The United States government over the past year has also displayed a remarkable passivity in dealing with the deteriorating situation in Argentina, which eventually resulted in financial meltdown and a severe political crisis. A more proactive policy by the United States might have helped avert the social explosion that took place on December 19. The looting and violent protests that occurred throughout the country left 28 dead and several injured, resulting in the collapse of the de la Rúa government. On January 1, after a rapid succession of truncated presidencies, Congress chose Eduardo Duhalde, a Peronist senator, to

serve the remainder of de la Rúa's term, which ends in December 2003.

As a result of a complex set of internal and external factors, Argentina had entered its fourth year of recession and had accumulated foreign debt of some \$141 billion. The problem was that de la Rúa's government had been nearly crippled in 2001, unable to generate a credible and coherent economic program. Part of Argentina's predicament can be attributed to domestic political decisions, partisan squabbling, excessive borrowing, and lack of fiscal discipline. These were compounded by a series of negative external shocks—especially Brazil's decision to devalue its currency by approximately 40 percent in 1999. Brazil is Argentina's largest trading partner, and the devaluation made Argentine products much less competitive in Brazil. The appreciation of the dollar also worsened Argentina's problems, since the peso, through a currency board and convertibility scheme, was pegged to the value of the dollar in 1991.

The Argentine crisis has enormous significance in two key respects. First, of the Latin American countries that underwent reforms in the 1990s, Argentina most closely adhered to the widely accepted recipes,

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including opening and privatizing its economy. Such a sharp reversal for a country not long ago regarded as the "darling of Wall Street"

has important implications for future policy prescriptions. This is especially so in view of the social violence and state of siege called by the government, which fell a few hours after that declaration. Argentina's meltdown could well fuel a growing backlash against other efforts in Latin America over the last decade to open economies and reduce the role of government. Second, although many governments had anticipated and taken steps to prepare for the Argentine debacle for some time, the country's financial collapse could nonetheless reverberate throughout a region that already finds itself in difficult economic straits.

In 2001, the Bush administration's response to the deteriorating situation in Argentina was tentative and uncertain at best. The United States backed support to Argentina from the International Monetary Fund only after South America's second-largest economy appeared to be at the edge of the abyss. The message from Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill was essentially that the crisis is Argentina's fault and that the consequences of a financial collapse would be manageable.

He strongly resisted any outside aid, invoking the problem of “moral hazard” or encouraging dependence from abroad. O’Neill’s comments about Argentina in August 2001 were strikingly cavalier: “They’ve been off and on in trouble for 70 years or more. They don’t have any export industry to speak of at all. And they like it that way. Nobody forced them to be what they are.” He asked, “You think five years from now anyone will remember this?”

Rarely did the Bush administration seem to consider or anticipate the political and foreign policy implications of a potential Argentine meltdown. Policy emanating from Washington in response to the crisis in Argentina devoted little if any attention to the challenge of constructing a new international financial architecture to deal with problems of volatility. Some serious policy explorations along these lines were pursued during the Clinton administration, under the leadership of Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, but they appear to have languished during the first year of the Bush administration.

### BRAZIL’S CRITICAL ELECTIONS

Although Brazil accounts for roughly one-third of the economic activity and population of Latin America, it seldom occupies a prominent place on Washington’s policy agenda. Yet, developments in Brazil will substantially shape the prospects for dealing with the multiple problems that affect the entire hemisphere. Without Brazil’s support and cooperation, collective efforts are likely to be exceedingly difficult. Moreover, although the Brazilian currency strengthened at the end of 2001, the South American giant is most vulnerable to spreading financial contagion from Argentina. The country also suffers from a high public debt. And concern is growing among some sectors in Brazil that the “spillover” of drugs and violence from Colombia could reach the politically and environmentally sensitive Amazon region.

During Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s two terms as president, Brazil has registered two noteworthy accomplishments, especially impressive when viewed in historical perspective. The first is the extension and deepening of democratic rule, reflected in Brazilian politics and society. The second is the country’s successful management of inflation, despite serious economic problems and a still largely unattended social agenda. But while Cardoso can doubtless be credited with having brought some political and economic order to Brazil, his level of public approval has been far from robust. Brazilians have been disappointed about charges of corruption among members of

Cardoso’s administration, the poor handling of a severe energy crisis, and the inability to achieve sustained economic growth.

Brazil’s presidential elections in October 2002 will be decisive domestically and will have major implications for the hemisphere, and certainly for the future of United States–Latin American relations. It is unclear, for example, to what extent the next Brazilian administration will be committed to a free trade agenda in the Americas and interested in playing a key role in such institutions as the Organization of American States and the United Nations. It also remains to be seen if Cardoso’s successor will be as inclined to help resolve conflicts such as that between Peru and Ecuador in 1998, or act as forcefully as Cardoso did when the military tried to take over in Paraguay in 1996.

The next Brazilian president will also have to deal with two challenging situations in the bordering countries of Venezuela and Colombia. In light of growing friction between Washington and Caracas, an active Brazilian role in dealing with President Chávez on a range of issues could be instrumental in preserving the delicate relationship between the United States and Venezuela. Politically, Venezuela is sharply polarized, fueled by Chávez’s intransigence and confrontational style. His trademark combativeness has generated increasing levels of civic mobilization, as reflected in a successful nationwide work stoppage on December 10. On the economic front, declining oil prices have exacerbated conditions for most Venezuelans, who are deeply concerned about mounting unemployment and crime. The country’s uncertain political future, and the government’s unpredictable behavior as the global campaign against terrorism unfolds, poses a significant policy challenge for the United States.

### THE ANDES AND BEYOND

Other critical elections in 2002 will be held not only in Colombia, with a new president taking over in August, but also in Ecuador and Bolivia, where the sitting presidents are in power because of the removal of incumbents either through a coup (Ecuador) or illness (Bolivia). For the United States, which is likely to continue to accord substantial weight to the drug issue in this set of countries, the changes in administration will be of great interest and concern.

Two of the brighter spots on Latin America’s political landscape—Peru and Mexico—grew somewhat dimmer as 2001 came to a close. Following the disclosure of the incredible levels of corruption

that occurred during the decade of rule by President Alberto Fujimori and his security chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, Peruvians had high expectations when Alejandro Toledo took over at the end of July. Yet, in his first months in office, the Peruvian president's approval levels have plummeted. Facing heightened social pressures and expectations, Toledo has struggled to chart a coherent policy course and to strike the right balance between dealing responsibly with the abuses of the previous regime and addressing pressing problems. And questions about Toledo's personal and professional conduct continue to bedevil him.

Mexico's economic decline in 2001 has taken a substantial political toll. President Fox retains relatively high levels of support, but he too has been sharply criticized for failing to govern effectively and deliver real results during his first year in office. For the remaining five years, Fox faces formidable challenges on multiple fronts that will severely test his political skills.

For Washington, despite some lingering concern and friction in the aftermath of September 11, the relationship between the United States and Mexico is, over the long term, simply too critical to be relegated to second tier. The bilateral agenda—from trade to immigration to drugs to corruption—is uniquely wide-ranging and needs to command the attention of the highest United States policy officials. Further, although Washington decidedly turned its attention away from Mexican concerns in the immediate post-September 11 period, in many parts of the United States—in the western and southwestern states particularly—key elements of the multifaceted relationship were essentially unaffected by the terrorist attacks.

Indeed, Mexico illustrates the opportunity afforded by the new global antiterrorist campaign to develop more cooperative relations on issues of mutual concern. A heightened focus on security and border-control measures by the United States government has opened up possibilities for effectively engaging key officials in both countries and making progress in facilitating new arrangements on immigration. Some evidence already indicates that, following September 11, stricter enforcement on the United States–Mexico border has resulted in increased drug seizures.

Some underlying long-term trends also bode well for an enhanced relationship between the United States and Mexico. United States electoral politics—the growing importance of the Hispanic and espe-

cially Mexican population—practically dictates that Washington politicians will stay focused on Mexico.

## WHAT ABOUT WASHINGTON?

Despite the opportunities to make progress in addressing a range of hemispheric issues, it is, unfortunately, unrealistic to expect the top leadership in the United States government to devote even the little time that they did before September 11 to Latin American issues. Within a framework of shifting priorities and budget constraints, moreover, resources that previously might have been destined for the region likely will be directed elsewhere in the world.

Middle-level leadership becomes especially crucial. After a prolonged partisan tug-of-war that kept the top State Department position on Latin America vacant for months, on January 11 President Bush gave his nominee, Ambassador Otto Reich, a recess appointment as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. The appointment lasts only through the current congressional session. The controversial decision—some critics were troubled by Reich's role in the Reagan administration during the Central American conflicts—could hamper Reich's effectiveness in devising a credible and bipartisan Latin American policy, drawing appropriate attention to the region's many serious problems, and mobilizing the bureaucracy to take advantage of important opportunities in response to such problems.

It remains to be seen whether the Bush administration will be able to fashion an effective, proactive policy toward the region. To secure Latin American support for its policy objectives, the United States must be sensitive to valid Latin American concerns on questions ranging from trade to internal conflict (Colombia) to financial collapse (Argentina). Otherwise, the United States cannot realistically expect that Latin American governments will enthusiastically join international coalitions to wage the global antiterrorist campaign.

Indeed, steps to define Latin American interests as identical to those of the United States are bound to provoke the same resentments and suspicions as they have in the past. And Latin Americans will no doubt interpret signs of withdrawal from Washington as evidence that the region is regarded as irrelevant. Both temptations—bullying and retreat—may well be even greater after September 11 than they were before. But given the compelling agenda and the prevailing mood in the hemisphere, both may be that much more important to resist. ■