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New president should embrace a new agenda

BY CHRIS DODD

Latin America is experiencing a positive revolution of sorts. Petty military dictators and East-West ideological struggle are things of the past. Political inclusion has expanded massively through overwhelmingly democratic processes, and millions of South and Central Americans have new expectations of their governments. Like anywhere, democracy in the region is sometimes messy, and mistakes are sometimes made. But the change is good.

The tit-for-tat ambassadorial expulsions between the United States and Bolivia and Venezuela in September underscore the urgent need for a new framework for our relations with Latin America. La Paz and Caracas were wrong to downgrade communications during a period of bilateral tensions. But we also need to look at ways to avoid such confrontations in the future.

The time has come to recognize that Latin America is not our backyard; it's our neighborhood, and we have an obligation to help make it better for everyone. The United States and Latin America are confronting challenges that affect us all -- from national security to narcotics trafficking to illegal migration.

This represents a huge opportunity for the United States. Latin America is struggling to consolidate democracy, deal with security threats, adapt to a globalized world, and create economic growth with equity. These are all issues in which the United States can provide valuable leadership and partnership.

The Bush administration has failed to embrace this opportunity, when it hasn't been missing in action. I'm no fan of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, but we contradicted our own stated commitment to democracy when we backed the coup against him in 2002. Focusing on troublemakers like Chávez, the administration failed to actively support those who hold democratic values. The mixed signals created a vacuum that "populist" demagogues have exploited.

The new U.S. president taking office in January will inherit an array of policy options, including free trade agreements, counter-narcotics initiatives and aid programs. But more important will be the opportunity to build a new, overarching partnership with the region. At the Summit of the Americas to be held in Trinidad and Tobago next April, he can set a positive tone, harness existing democratic energies and better marshal resources behind common-sense solutions.

Ideas at the top of the agenda should include:

- **Partner with** the region's other consolidated democracies, particularly Mexico and Brazil. The region doesn't want or need micromanagement, but often welcomes our leadership and

partnership. We should resist intervening bilaterally on issues best handled in the neighborhood and trust regional leaders to prioritize solutions. In fighting poverty and inequality, for example, we should encourage Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose efforts have helped millions, to take the lead in propagating models for growth.

- **Look beyond** the traditional elites. Our commitment in Latin America should be to fair, democratic processes, even when the results do not favor our traditional allies. Just as we need to remind the new leaders to cooperate with the nation's elites, so too must we emphasize the need for elites to eschew undemocratic practice. In countries like Bolivia, where the democratic credentials of President Evo Morales and the traditional political class are frayed, all sides -- indigenous and mestizo, rich and poor, highlands and lowlands -- must respect each other and compromise.

- **Recognize** the region's emerging role in energy into the 21st century. Recent oil discoveries put Brazil among the ranks of the world's major exporters, and its research and experience make it a leader in biofuel technology. Mexico is a major exporter, and Bolivia's gas reserves are massive. But where Venezuela uses its vast energy supplies to buy short-term political loyalty, other producers are poised to help the region find strategic solutions to energy needs.

- **Adapt** our Cuba policy to changing realities on the island, in the region and in our own country. Reorienting policy toward the Cuban people and the future, not the Castro brothers and the grudges of the past, will go a long way toward removing a huge blot from our credibility in the hemisphere. Our effectiveness and credibility in the region will be the better for it.

With America's overcommitment in Iraq and elsewhere and increasing economic challenges, no one expects an expansion of assistance to Latin America anytime soon. But a new partnership -- emphasizing the region's own solutions, resources and strengths -- will prove far more effective than any government program could ever hope to be.

At the Summit of the Americas next April, the world will see a Latin America embracing change. The moment will be right for the United States to do the same.

Senator Chris Dodd (D-Conn) is chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.