

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Make Latin Americans our good neighbors again

By Mark Weisbrot

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President-elect Barack Obama's historic triumph was welcomed in Latin America by left-of-center governments that saw it as a continuation of their own electoral victories. Obama has an opportunity to forge a new relationship with the region after his predecessor drove U.S.-Latin American relations into a ditch.

But it will require a major change in Washington's attitude toward our southern neighbors.

Most important, as the Brookings Institution recently noted, the Obama administration will have to abandon Bush's efforts to divide the left-of-center governments into a "good left" and "bad left," rewarding the former and punishing the latter.

Most recently, the Bush administration decided to punish Bolivia by suspending its trade preferences and threatening tens of thousands of jobs there -- allegedly for not cooperating in the "war on drugs."

Bolivia's President Evo Morales met in Washington with Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind. Lugar is the most influential Republican on foreign policy issues and is very close to Obama.

Lugar issued a very positive press statement on the meeting with Evo:

"The United States regrets any perception that it has been disrespectful, insensitive, or engaged in any improper activities that would disregard the legitimacy of the current Bolivian government or its sovereignty," he said. "We hope to renew our relationship with Bolivia and to develop a rapport grounded on respect and transparency."

Although Evo Morales handed this statement to The Washington Post, neither the meeting with Lugar nor Lugar's statement made it into the print edition of The Post's article on Evo's visit.

This indicates that the incoming Obama administration will have to confront not only the State Department but also some of the major media if it wants to change relations with Latin America.

Bolivia expelled the U.S. ambassador in September because of Washington's support for opposition groups there. The U.S. State Department spent \$89 million in Bolivia last year. Some of it went to opposition groups; we don't know exactly how much because our government does not provide full disclosure.

Washington also is supplying millions of dollars to undisclosed organizations in Venezuela, where it supported a military coup in 2002. Imagine if China or Russia were pumping \$100 billion (the equivalent here) into in the United States and some billions went to undisclosed groups.

Brazil's foreign minister went to Iran recently, where he publicly defended Iran's right to enrich uranium, and announced that expanding commercial and other ties to Iran were "a foreign policy priority" for Brazil.

The State Department and U.S. media ignored these statements because they came from Brazil. But when Venezuela does the same thing, it is considered impermissible.

These are the kinds of double standards that the Obama administration will have to abandon if it wants a new relationship with Latin America.

The left governments of Latin America have all reached out to our new president-elect with great hopes and expectations. It will now be up to our new government to break with the past and respect the sovereignty and dignity of our neighbors to the south. That's all they are asking for.

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