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## Q & A

### U.S. needs to end 'imperial attitude,' Bolivian says

Former Bolivian President Carlos Mesa has some advice for Obama, starting with the closing of Guantanamo and lifting of the embargo on Cuba.

By Chris Kraul

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Reporting from La Paz, Bolivia — To mend U.S.-Latin American relations, President Obama must first recover the moral authority the U.S. has lost with its operation of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, says former Bolivian President Carlos Mesa.

Mesa has a unique perspective on U.S.-Latin American relations as a former news reporter, historian, U.S. cinephile and Bolivia's president from 2003 to 2005. He said he expects to run for the presidency again later this year against incumbent Evo Morales.

Though Mesa admires the democratic principles on which the U.S. was founded, he opposes what he terms the cynical lack of application of those values, including the denial of due process to Guantanamo detainees under former President Bush. **If you were President Obama, what would you do to improve U.S. relations with Latin America?**

In terms of policy, the United States has to end its imperial attitude of giving instructions, imposing models and instead arrive at consensus respectfully with its interlocutors no matter how small they might be. The U.S. has a very urgent task ahead of it, which is to recover its moral values so that we can believe in it again as leader of the free world. **How can it do that?**

Closing the Guantanamo detention facility is a good start. I would also lift the embargo on Cuba and reform the Organization of American States in which Cuba is invited to return and in which the U.S. lowers its influence. Brazil and Mexico are both institutionally strong and should play stronger leadership roles.

If Obama has relations with China, why not with Cuba? What's the difference in terms of human rights violations and dictatorship? China is a pure dictatorship, but it happens to be the largest country on Earth and a trade partner, whereas Cuba is a just a few million people. So the moral values are being applied with a double standard.

I would take those risks because lifting the Cuba embargo and readmitting it to the OAS would be applauded across Latin America. Furthermore, it would eliminate Cuba's excuse that it suffers by being isolated by the U.S. exclusionary policy. Cuba would be exposed and wouldn't last a moment, because without the U.S. as an enemy, it can't exist. **Do you think Obama can make a difference?**

Reading his book, the one he wrote before he ran for president, I see he has no idea of Latin America, its history, idiosyncrasies or interests. But he does have a very clear vision of U.S. foreign policy and the role that the U.S. should play in the world and that the U.S. can't continue using military power to determine the imposition of its principles on the rest of the world. **How deep a hole is the United States in, in terms of its relations with Latin America?**

Very deep. U.S. relations across Latin America are very damaged. The U.S. no longer has the conditions to impose its ideas because it has lost its moral leadership. That's the biggest deficit Obama is facing. Gone are the times when it could impose or support a military dictatorship. Resolutions are arrived at democratically now. Latin America has the right to resolve its own crises, without resorting to the paternalism of the U.S. **Would you describe yourself as pro- or anti-U.S., or is it not a fair question?**

As an individual I admire profoundly how the U.S. constructed a democratic vision, the most integrated and complete on Earth. It's an extraordinary model. Yes, it was late in putting into practice some of those philosophies because of the problem of racism, but even considering that serious fault, the U.S. was and is a model of democratic practice.

But since the end of the Second World War, when it became a world power, there has been a distortion of that democratic logic. In the interests of its security, the U.S. wrongly began to decide the values that other countries should live by. That's a complicating factor because we are discovering the world has a multiplicity of values, of multicultural visions, and what the West sees as correct you can't assume you can apply mechanically to the Islamic or Andean worlds, or the Far East. **When did U.S.-Latin America relations really start to go bad?**

In 1964 when President Johnson substituted the logic of President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, an economic aid program, with his national security doctrine that included training and strengthening the region's armies to control communism in the face of the Cuban revolution. That ushered in the age of bloody dictatorships that lasted through the 1980s and which the U.S. supported because they responded to its anti-communistic vision.

But the most dramatic break from U.S. moral logic occurred with President George W. Bush, who after Sept. 11 totally lost his way in terms of U.S. moral values. **Based on my conversations in Latin America, Guantanamo seems to resonate more deeply here than even among U.S. citizens.**

It was a dramatic and possibly unique point in history -- the U.S. renouncing the application of the rule of law. That's the essence of what the U.S. has defended as the great model in its competition with communism and now terrorism. That's what I demand of Obama -- that he recovers this criterion. You can't give classes on morals if you're not applying them in your own territory.