

3-15-2007

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Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "President George W. Bush In Latin America: Low Expectations Unmet." (2007). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9492>

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President George W. Bush In Latin America: Low Expectations Unmet

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2007-03-15

US President George W. Bush had a rough time of it during his "social justice" tour of five Latin American countries, a trip with the goal of recovering some of the influence and prestige lost in the region during the past six years of his administration. Protests met the president wherever he traveled. His first stop, in Brazil, was marked by mass marches against his visit, as was his second in Uruguay, where he was additionally hounded by Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who launched a stinging attack on him from just across the Rio de la Plata in Buenos Aires.

It was widely held that Bush was forced into the trip to counter Chavez's growing influence in Latin America, and the Venezuelan readily took up the challenge. As guest of Argentina's President Nestor Kirchner, he said of his adversary just 50 km away, "Kirchner and I don't need to plan anything to sabotage this visit, because we are witnessing the true political corpse." He also told his audience, "We have organized this event to say no to the presence of the chief of the empire here in the heroic lands of South America." He called Bush's predeparture strained comparison of George Washington and Simon Bolivar "heresy and ignorance."

The speech was vintage Chavez in its vituperation but also definitive in laying out the terms of the debate. "He represents that Monroe Doctrine of America for the Americans. Well, we will have to tell him: North America for the North Americans and South America for the South Americans. This is our America."

Subtle rebuffs

Some of the rebuffs Bush suffered were a good deal subtler than the words of Chavez or the crowds in the streets. In Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe, South America's greatest beneficiary of US largesse (see NotiSur, 2007-03-09), greeted Bush warmly, but, scarcely 24 hours after he left, Uribe sent a high-level delegation to Havana to arrange for the use of the Cuban educational model for primary education in Colombia. This, after Bush went on about US aid to the country for peaceful development. The delegation to Cuba was headed by Education Minister Cecilia Maria Velez and included a dozen Colombian education officials and the director of the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) Elvira Forero. The educational program calls for a pilot plan in Antioquia followed by the program's extension to the entire country.

In Brazil, Bush's first stop, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will be receiving Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega on March 13, practically on Bush's heels. Ortega is a close ally of Chavez and an historic US adversary.

Cleansing the Bush taint in Guatemala

At the same level of subtle rejection, Mayan priests in Guatemala announced plans to purify a sacred site to eliminate "bad spirits" after Bush's visit. Said Mayan leader Juan Tiney, "That a person like Bush, with the persecution of our migrant brothers in the United States, with the wars he has provoked, is going to walk in our sacred lands is an offense for the Mayan people and their culture." Bush was scheduled to visit the sacred site at Iximche. Tiney said the "spiritual guides of the Mayan community" decided it would be necessary to cleanse the area after the Bush visit so that their ancestors could rest in peace.

Iximche was the capital of the Kaqchiquel people from 1470, before the conquest in 1524. "Iximche represents the dignity of the Mayan people and we can't have a man who represents war come to this place," said protest leader Jorge Morales. "Our ancestors have spent hundreds of years on this site, and they will feel his presence."

The visit to Guatemala was especially intrusive, the security especially tight, in this country still reeling from the murders of three foreign politicians (see NotiCen, 2007-02-22 and 2007-03-01). Joint security forces comprising the Secretaria de Asuntos Administrativos y Seguridad (SAAS) and the US Secret Service even staged a mock motorcade to flush out any planned assassination attempt. About 120 US security personnel, arriving in a separate plane, provided additional security. The Coordinadora Nacional para la Reduccion de Desastres put the departments of Guatemala, Sacatepequez, and Chimaltenango under a 12-hour alert. Aurora International Airport was shut down and commercial flights delayed for hours. Warplanes patrolled, clearing airspace. Vehicular traffic in the usually gridlocked capital was restricted. Pedestrians were cautioned to carry identification documents in the city's center. More than a thousand soldiers were deployed throughout the city, and 19,000 police were deployed. The Cadillac in which Bush traveled has been called the most secure in the world, specially armored to withstand anti-tank weaponry and capable of speeds of 280 km/h. Five identical vehicles accompanied the Cadillac to confuse would-be sharpshooters.

Critics in the political opposition charged that martial law had been imposed to accommodate the visit. And so it went for a stopover about which Vice President Eduardo Stein said, "We don't expect much and have never hoped for anything concrete." He said the visit had been announced less than a month prior and was "not the result of long discussions on concrete themes that could be finalized with the visit." Discussions, he said, would be the usual mix: narcotraffic, security, migration, and free trade.

Free-trade talk was not what Guatemalans wanted to hear, and Bush's lack of preparation to take on migration issues kept the security minions hopping. Riot police fired tear gas at egg-throwing, flag-burning protesters in the capital, and more protests occurred at Iximche, where local resident Armando Chavajay told reporters, "Bush doesn't accept us on his land, so why should we let him on ours? They grab us in the US and send us out like criminals. We are going there to work and help our families. Now he will know how we feel." The incensed population blocked the road to the sacred site with boulders, but soldiers had the road cleared by the time the motorcade passed.

Besides Guatemalans seeing countrymen and women returning home as deportees, the local media have covered heavily a recent immigration raid in the US where 300 migrant workers were

detained at a Massachusetts factory that makes vests for the military. The stories were peppered with accounts of families sundered and about 100 children left behind as parents were deported. Guatemalan and foreign reporters questioned Bush about the raid. He denied the deportations. "We're a decent, compassionate country. Those are the kind of things we do not do," said Bush. "We believe in families, and we'll treat people with dignity."

That story did not sell among a population with ample access to first-hand accounts of deportations. Many chose to believe the theory circulating in the country that the raid was planned in advance of Bush's trip to send a message on illegal immigration. Bush may have reinforced this belief by defending the raid saying, "People will be treated with respect, but the United States will enforce our law." The Bush rhetoric did not jibe with the perceived reality as he defended not only the drastic enforcement actions but also the building of walls and fences along the US southern border while asserting that he is committed to not expelling most illegal immigrants.

Bush's inaction put an already beleaguered President Oscar Berger in an awkward position. Berger had promised to prod the US president on the migration question, and a population of which 1.3 million, 10%, now lives in the US expected more from him. Most Guatemalans in the US are there illegally. Berger's welcoming speech contained oblique reference to the recent raid. In the end, Bush concluded the trip leaving Guatemalans little to hope for in the way of change. "There will be no amnesty, nor automatic citizenship, but neither are we able to remove all [the undocumented] from the country," were his parting words on the subject.

Berger could only say, "We would have wanted a clearer and more positive response, but it is also true that this is the closest we have been to a solution to the problem." By a solution, Berger meant that Bush had said he expected congressional action on immigration reform by August 2007.

Editorial and opinion-page commentary on Bush in Guatemala was generally negative. Columnist Miguel Angel Albizures wrote, "As much as President Berger and Vice President Stein struggle to explain to Bush the perceptions of the migrants, he is not going to understand anything because he doesn't understand Spanish and he has never understood the Latin American issue or the right of the people to forge their own destiny. We cannot expect worthy attitudes from the rulers because they represent a class that only sees their own interests." Albizures writes as a Guatemalan who has not forgotten the whole of his country's experience with the US, back to the invasion and coup of 1954, which toppled the only truly democratic period the country ever had and set the stage for a national descent into the hell of dictatorship and civil war. It was not only that, he wrote, "but the presence of a permanent gendarme who dictates orders for the implementation of policies injurious to an entire people." He wrote that people "cannot be slapped down and then have a hand extended to them as if nothing had happened". This, he says, is what the people are protesting.

Why Bush chose Guatemala

An editorial in *El Periodico* teases out the selection of Guatemala for a Bush visit. It concludes that a Central American country had to be chosen because it represents an economic block, the old Central American Common Market expanded into the current initiative, the Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA), a Bush dream in process of coming true.

But Costa Rica, which otherwise might have been a good choice as the shining example of regional development, was not an option. Costa Rica is locked in intense combat regarding ratification of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). A Bush visit there could have been counterproductive to President Oscar Arias' campaign to get the legislation he needs (see NotiCen, 2007-01-25), "and could have been seen as a snub to the rest of the countries" that passed the complex reforms without great resistance.

El Salvador, the other star economy of the region and best friend of the US with its commitment of troops to Iraq, could not have been picked because of the enormous popular disdain for the policy there. Instead, President Antonio Saca visited the White House recently (see NotiCen, 2007-02-01 and 2007-02-15). Hence, Guatemala.

The editorial was written before the visit and ended with the hope that better treatment of migrants would result. Child labor, another unresolved issue it did not. Nor did better treatment of child laborers under the provisions of CAFTA get any hoped-for attention. As Bush spoke about the benefits of free trade and put forth the notion that "most citizens in Guatemala would rather find meaningful jobs at home instead of having to travel to a foreign land to work," a plant made possible by the trade agreement stood as a lurid example of why that is not true.

Less than 15 km from where Bush was speaking is the Legumex agroindustrial factory. There, according to Charles Kernaghan, executive director of the National Labor Committee, "inside the factory, they're all kids. The vast majority were thirteen years of age to seventeen. It looks like a high school, but it's not a high school. These kids are going in from seven in the morning to seven at night, six days a week. Sometimes they have to come in earlier." Kernaghan described harsh working conditions, the kids having to cut broccoli at a high rate of speed, cutting themselves from time to time in the process. They stand on their feet the entire time, suffering a variety of pains and repetitive-stress injuries. When cutting melons, they stand in inch-deep water used to wash the fruit; their feet macerate and swell. It is cold inside the factory, surrounded by freezers, "and they won't let the kids wear sweaters because the sweaters may get lint onto the fruit or vegetables." The supervisors wear jackets.

Kernaghan said his investigations revealed that the kids were earning about half the legal minimum wage and did not get social security, which is mandatory in Guatemala. "And this was right next to where George Bush was giving his talk about the benefits of free trade," he said. The US company that buys and distributes the products, Superior Foods of Watsonville, California, wrote in response to the findings, "We're surprised and concerned about the labor violations alleged in the NLC report, and we'll immediately investigate these serious allegations in that particular facility."

Bush's next and last stop on his tour was Mexico. There he might have expected his most cordial welcome because of the political affinities between the US president and the conservative Mexican President Felipe Calderon. Instead, Bush got a scolding on the migration issue and on US failure to curb illegal drug consumption while insisting on ever-more-intense anti-drug activity on Mexico's part (see SourceMex, 2007-03-14). More intriguing, however, was that, with the visit in progress, Calderon announced that, after eight years of estrangement, Mexico has been working to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba and that the effort could entail a Calderon trip to the island.

"We are working discreetly but intensely on re-establishing a more fluid and solid relationship. I have expressed my interest in visiting [Cuban President] Fidel Castro, and, aside from the fact that I'm happy to hear that he is recuperating, I don't discard the possibility of planning a working trip or visit of state to the island." With this announcement, Calderon joins Lula of Brazil and Uribe of Colombia in making a significant gesture to the left contiguously in time with the reception of Bush. Some analysts see this as recognition by the presidents that they are dealing with a weak and unpopular leader who represents diametrical opposition to the region's current political and social trends.

The Mayan priests might see it as a ritual cleansing.

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