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Clinton Policy Toward Latin America: Repackaging The Bush Agenda?

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. Robinson LADB News Analyst [Appearing below is part one of an analysis regarding what type of policies toward Latin America are likely to emerge under the Clinton administration. Part two will be published in the 11/17/92 edition of NotiSur.] With the Nov. 3 electoral victory of Bill Clinton, the "political season" is over and the "policy season" has begun in Washington. As competing constituencies in the Washington establishment scramble to influence the Clinton transition team, journalists and pundits have turned from following the campaign to trying to get a handle on what concrete policies and programs to expect from the new administration. Interviews with policy analysts in Washington and a review of campaign and transition team documents indicate that Bill Clinton's policies toward Latin America will be largely a continuation, with certain modifications, of the Bush administration agenda for the hemisphere. As was the case during the electoral campaign, foreign policy will be accorded second place to domestic policy. The Clinton team has emphasized that its program for domestic economic recovery will largely dictate foreign policy, which will be driven by the effort to expand international markets and regain a competitive edge for the US in world trade. For Latin America, this means that the centerpiece of US policy will be free trade and hemispheric integration based on the ongoing promotion of structural adjustment programs and the consummation and subsequent extension further south of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the US, Canada, and Mexico. Clinton will adopt the Bush administration's banner of "trade not aid." Like the Bush administration, the new team will also focus on developing multilateral mechanisms and forums particularly the Organization of American States (OAS) for collective action to address "security crises" and "trouble spots" of concern to Washington, such as Haiti and Peru. Latin America policy planners stress that the US could face many potential crises. The chief dilemma for Washington will be how to insulate fragile formal democracies from social crises generated by structural adjustment programs. Clinton stated in October that "we should do more to support those struggling to establish grassroots democracy in Latin America," adding that the US had misdirected its aid programs "toward central governments and the wealthy." Bilateral relations with Mexico will take precedence over all other concerns, while Cuba, El Salvador, Panama and Haiti will probably draw special attention from the new US administration. During his campaign, Clinton spoke of Washington's "particular democratic responsibility" to "prevent violence in Haiti," to restore democracy in Peru, and to "end communism in Cuba." Repackaging the Bush Agenda Unlike the last two transitions between Republican and Democratic administrations (Ford-Carter in 1976 and Carter- Reagan in 1980), the shift from Bush to Clinton is not expected to bring any major change in US strategies toward Latin America. During the campaign, Clinton stressed the need for a foreign policy based on trade and the opening of markets, on the one hand, and human rights and democracy, on the other. While these goals are similar to those adopted by the Carter administration, the current circumstances are radically different. The Carter administration assumed office when most of Latin America was under military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that had enjoyed the tacit and at times explicit support of earlier Republican administrations. Clinton now takes office when most of Latin America is ruled by formal
democracies. Thus, support for democracy and human rights, with a few exceptions, translates into defending and stabilizing the current political status quo and promoting the US version of economic growth through free trade. Paradoxically, the significant shift in policy came with the transition from Reagan to Bush. In general, the hemispheric agenda developed during the second half of the Bush administration gained broad bipartisan support over the past two years. That same agenda is expected to remain in place under Clinton, notwithstanding certain modifications (see part two of this article). This agenda included a shift from ideology to pragmatism, and from "hard-policy" security concerns to "soft-policy" economic concerns. Bush has pursued a Western hemisphere trading bloc, the "war on drugs" (which will probably be modified under Clinton), the promotion of "democratic transitions," and multilateral initiatives (albeit under heavy US influence) as a means to address regional political crises and security concerns, such as the attempted OAS mediation in Haiti and Peru. In Central America, Bush shifted policy from a strategy of military confrontation to one based on political contention with leftist adversaries. Although the crisis still persists in Central America and indeed throughout much of the hemisphere the isthmus is no longer an international "hot spot" or a security concern for the US and has ceased to be an ideological battleground and a source of partisan policy friction in Washington. With the exception of its unilateral invasion of Panama, the Bush administration was able to mend the sharp strains in US-Latin America relations engendered by Reagan policy, with its emphasis on "multilateral" approaches, the "resolution" of the Central American crisis, and the cultivation of close working relations with key countries like Venezuela and Mexico. "We now have an agenda of issues for US policy toward Latin America that has emerged over the past four years which is broaden bipartisan and is pretty well fixed," Peter Hakim, senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue, told LADB. "Partly because of the end of the Cold War, partly because of changes that have taken place in Latin America and the US, and partly because US policy is now conducted [in consultation] with the main Latin American countries, there is general agreement on what US policy should be, on its themes, issues, and direction." The Inter-American Dialogue is an influential liberal policy-planning group for Latin America whose members include important former and current US and Latin American government officials and political leaders. Dialogue members include former UN secretary general Javier Perez de Cuellar, former Argentine president Raul Alfonsin, and such prominent Washington insiders as Elliot Richardson, McGeorge Bundy and John Whitehead. The group, which was fiercely critical of Reagan policy, feels that the alternative agenda which it vigorously promoted in the 1980s was embraced for the most part under Bush and will be given continuity under Clinton, says Hakim. The group's current president, Richard Feinberg, has been mentioned as one of several contenders for the position of assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs in the new administration. Hakim's view is widely shared. "The key areas in terms of Latin America policy will probably remain the same, moving from the Bush to the Clinton administrations," says Douglas Payne, director of hemispheric affairs at Freedom House, a bipartisan neo-conservative think-tank. Freedom House executive board member Penn Kemble is an advisor to the Clinton team on hemispheric affairs, and a personal associate of Bush's current assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Bernard Aronson. Bill Goodfellow, director of the Washington-based Center for International Policy, whose board includes prominent former Democratic government officials and diplomats involved in Latin America policy, points out that foreign policy, including toward Latin America, is not going to be a priority, and "trade is a pragmatic, non-ideological policy." He characterized Clinton's future policy toward the hemisphere as "a straightforward business agenda." Payne adds a note of caution: "Unfortunately, US policy toward Latin America traditionally has gone in a cycle of neglect followed by panicked response to some type of crisis, and I believe
that will probably remain the case for the Clinton administration." Who will be the new players? The general thrust and outlines of Clinton's Latin America policy are already clear. However, how policy will be "operationalized," as well as specific country policies and controversial issues such as Haitian refugees and Cuba policy will depend on who is eventually appointed to cabinet and departmental posts. Clinton's advisors during the campaign and in the transition team have been drawn from a broad political spectrum. One grouping is made up of former officials from the Carter administration. This group is expected to exercise considerable influence on Latin America policy. This includes Warren Christopher, recently named to head the Clinton transition team. Christopher was Carter's assistant secretary of state for humanitarian affairs, and is considered a candidate for the position of secretary of state. Another important core group is drawn from the Democratic Leadership Council and two of the institutes associated with it, the Progressive Policy Institute and the Center for National Policy. The Council and affiliated institutes represent Clinton's own center-right wing of the Democratic party which seized leadership of the party with his candidacy. They are credited with having drawn up the national defense and free trade planks of the Clinton-Gore platform and will undoubtedly exercise an influence on foreign policy. A third group are those neo-conservatives who have worked closely with the Bush administration on foreign policy, with an emphasis on security concerns, such as Bernard Aronson, and Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The final group is comprised of Democratic members of Congress with experience in foreign policy issues. Clinton's transition team will probably select key officials from all four of these groups. Eventual appointees, particularly at the level of assistant secretaries, heads of sections and bureaus at the State Department and other agencies, and key ambassadorial posts, certainly in terms of Latin America, are expected to be less a function of conflicting policy alternatives than the outcome of party politics, rivalry and competition among the diverse constituencies of the Clinton coalition. "One of the successes of the Clinton campaign is that it was able to unite different viewpoints, certainly regarding policy towards Latin America," says Payne, from Freedom House. "Over the next several months, and beyond the inauguration, there is going to be a tussle among people in the Democratic party for those positions, and who gets what will in large part define specific policy positions." Besides Christopher, other contenders that have been mentioned for secretary of state include Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN), a senior member of the Democratic bench in Congress, and Madeleine Albright, who heads the Democratic Leadership Council. Sam Nunn (D-GA), chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Les Aspin (D-WI), head of the House Armed Service Committee, have been mentioned as likely contenders for defense secretary, while Dave McCurdy (D-OK) of the House Select Committee on Intelligence has been mentioned for the post of CIA director. All three are from the conservative "cold war" wing of the Democratic party and are experts on defense and intelligence matters. Who is actually appointed to the top posts, including State, Defense, the National Security Council (NSC), and the Commerce Department, will have important bearings on appointments to Latin America staff positions. The most prominent candidate for assistant secretary for inter-American affairs is Robert Pastor, director of Latin American affairs in Carter's National Security Council. Pastor has been highly active during the Bush administration in parallel, or "two track," diplomatic initiatives in the hemisphere from his position as director of Latin American and Caribbean programs at the Carter Center. Pastor's article in the November issue of the influential policy-planning journal Foreign Policy, titled "The Latin American Option," has been circulating widely in Washington as what a general blueprint of Clinton policy would look like should he get the post. In the article, Pastor stresses that Latin America policy should move from the periphery to the center of US foreign policy concerns on the basis of the crucial importance to the US of a hemispheric trading bloc in the emerging tri-polar
world economic order. Pastor also calls for a "more coherent strategy, multilateral in approach, but with strong US leadership," for addressing hemispheric security concerns and political crises such as attempted coup d'etats and guerrilla insurgencies as well as for recurrent problems, such as drug trafficking and territorial disputes. Pastor's call for a revitalized OAS has been echoed in almost every quarter in Washington in terms of Latin America policy. "Pastor's prospects will depend on how much Jimmy Carter wants to go to bat for him," asserts Larry Birns, director of the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA). Other names which have been mentioned for the post of assistant secretary are Richard Feinberg, president of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue, and Sally Shelton-Colby, a former ambassador in the Caribbean and wife of former CIA director William Colby. Shelton-Colby has been active in promoting the NAFTA and hemispheric trade initiatives. In addition, Aronson is also considered a contender for reappointment. Aronson, himself a Democrat, is largely credited in the Washington policy-making community with having overseen the transition from the conflictive Reagan policy to Bush's bipartisan agenda. In particular, he is credited with having helped end the partisan split over Central America by shifting policy toward Nicaragua and by helping to broker a political solution to the Salvadoran conflict. Inter-American relations in the post Cold War era Whatever specific policies are adopted by the Clinton administration, Latin America will take second place to other foreign policy priorities, such as the European Economic Community (EEC), the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and the Pacific rim. Pastor writes: "Since World War II, Latin America has stayed on the margins of US priorities. Asia and Europe were the focus of US interests, and with the demise of the Soviet Union, those two economic regions are even more important. But to compete with them and assert global leadership today, Washington must enlist the cooperation of Latin America and the Caribbean in building a hemispheric market and a democratic community, and thus a competitive edge." It would seem that Latin America has reverted to its pre-Cold War status in relation to the United States: the secure and undisputed US sphere of influence in the face of competing Great Powers and global challenges. In this regard, the underlying objective behind Clinton's future Latin America policy will be to seek the continuity of traditional inter-American relations with its characteristic asymmetries and attendant conflicts in the passage from the Cold War to the post Cold War world.

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