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A New Era For U.S. Foreign Assistance?: Neither Legislation Nor Initiatives Indicate Much Change

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[The following article was written by Lourdes Prado of the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA). The article originally appeared in the September 3, 1993 issue of COHA's biweekly publication, "Washington Report on the Hemisphere."] The House Committee on Appropriations has declared that the pending foreign aid bill represents "a new era in foreign assistance." Yet, the distribution of aid for 1994 seems to demonstrate a continued Cold War mentality, with the states comprising the former Soviet Union being an area of principal concern, while Latin America feels the effects of a tightening US budget and a highly politicized strategy of aid distribution. President Clinton has not yet delineated the future role of US assistance policies and the degree to which aid and foreign policy should be integrated. New regulations that would apply to Nicaragua, Haiti, Guatemala and Peru specify that aid for these countries may not be expended prior to a fifteen-day advance notification to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which could subject the granting of such assistance to a political agenda rather than objective criteria. Furthermore, work has begun toward rewriting the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 so that "the authorizing committee would be restored to its rightful role in defining foreign policy" and "the administration would be given maximum flexibility to deal with the world's problems." Various voices in Washington have expressed concern that foreign assistance is on the road to becoming overseas welfare, rather than promoting specific US interests. Because the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the primary distributor of foreign funding, has had a horrid history of incompetence, USAID could face a major overhaul. While it retains its structure and budget for 1994, it is speculated that the agency will eventually be forced to surrender much of its responsibilities to the State Department, or at least be subject to increased oversight from Foggy Bottom. While it never has generated mass public appeal, foreign aid previously was defended on the grounds that it helped combat the spread of Communism by winning over allies among the recipient country's political elites, with the fight against poverty and illiteracy taking a subordinate role. It is increasingly difficult to find support for costly, long-term infrastructural projects like improving public sanitation, which, while necessary for the promotion of democratic institutions, hardly holds much public appeal. This is especially true in Latin America, because the perceived security threat there has largely disappeared. The US has begun to take for granted the preliminary stage of democracy at which many Latin American societies now find themselves lodged. While encouraging, their progress still requires continued support. Whatever direction future foreign aid policy may take, it will be interesting to observe whether the Clinton administration will cease to apply Washington's traditional double standards to Latin America of exaggerating delinquencies of its ideological foes and minimizing those of its friends. Hemispheric aid has always been a game that Washington has played with shifting rules, and so far, it does not appear that Clinton's policy will be de-politicized or made consistent. In August, newly installed assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs Alexander Watson threatened to halt further aid to Nicaragua until a date was set for the retirement of armed forces leader and Sandinista Gen. Humberto Ortega. The State Department based this palpable interventionist decision on the supposed lack of civilian control

over Nicaragua's military and so far unevidenced allegations that the Sandinistas aided the bombers of the World Trade Center. The ultimatum means that democratically elected President Chamorro will not be able to handle her country's profoundly delicate political situation without having to be afflicted with the additional burden of a threatened aid cut-off. This could further aggravate Nicaragua's already volatile situation and make national reconciliation all the more difficult to achieve during a time when the country's economic situation has deteriorated to a degree where further social turmoil becomes likely, or even inevitable. The congressional response to the UN Truth Commission report on El Salvador, however, evoked an opposite reaction. Despite promising that US aid to El Salvador would be based on the country's commitment to following the UN's recommendations, Congress did not react when Salvadoran President Cristiani announced that amnesty would be granted to individuals in the military guilty of heinous human rights violations. Clearly, El Salvador was permitted to pass a test for which Cuba and Nicaragua were not qualified. Surely, the aggressive amnesia that Washington has displayed towards El Salvador was also present regarding the human rights violations by Haiti's military. Forgive and forget is Washington's formula for the various Gotterdammerungen that have befallen the hemisphere. Should the aid bill pass, future assistance to Peru will be dependent on that government's response to the demand for compensation for a US crewman killed accidentally in 1992 by a Peruvian jet. Meanwhile, no comparable action is being taken by Washington after the August assassination of a CIA agent in the Georgian republic. If and when Clinton decides how foreign assistance should serve US interests in this new era, Washington would do well to reconsider its present policy of reducing funds for Latin America and re-channeling them to distant continents. With almost twice the population of the former Soviet Union and a far greater proximity to major population centers in this country, an increased investment in Latin America would set the basis for greater economic gains, while working toward reducing immigration flows. Although difficult to convey to most Americans, foreign aid continues to be crucial to hemispheric stability and economic prosperity, and it would be to our peril if we dismiss our neighbors to the chaos of the post-Cold War world.

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