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## U.S. Relations with Latin America Go from Bad to Worse

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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With the Eighth Summit of the Americas just a month-and-a-half away, the US continues to give relations with Latin America short shrift and as many international analysts note, show a level of disrespect to the region that is alienating even its friends and allies ([NotiSur, Oct. 20, 2017](#)).

“It’s been said that other Washington administrations didn’t care about Latin America, and that’s true. But what’s happening now is dramatically worse,” Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, told BBC Mundo earlier this year. “The disinterest in the region is unprecedented. [But] it could still get worse ... It’s possible we haven’t seen the low point yet.”

Shifter’s comment came less than two weeks after Trump reportedly used the term “shithole” to describe Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador, and certain African countries.

Diplomats across the globe, including from the UN, don’t mince words when talking about Trump’s attitude and remarks. In recent weeks, it’s been common to hear terms like racist, xenophobe, stupid, insulting, embarrassing, repugnant, and many others to describe the US leader.

“I am sorry, but there is no other word one can use but racist,” Rupert Colville, the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in response to Trump’s rant, in which the president questioned why the US should accept immigrants from Central American, Caribbean, and African countries. “You can’t dismiss entire countries and continents as ‘shitholes’ whose entire population is not white and therefore are not welcomed.”

Trump’s behavior has also had repercussions within the US diplomatic corps. On Jan. 12, just as 415 soldiers with the US Southern Command were preparing to conduct joint military operations (that will extend until July) with the Panamanian armed forces, the US ambassador in Panama, John Feeley, resigned, saying he no longer felt comfortable serving the Trump administration.

Interestingly, the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, didn’t emulate the African Union or the group of 54 African ambassadors accredited by the UN and demand that Trump retract his remarks so as to repair the damage caused by what US Sen. Dick Durbin, a Democrat for Illinois, called “hateful, vile and racist” language.

### Terminating TPS

Trump tried to deny the profane words he used, but the comments—expressed during a meeting in the White House—were heard by numerous lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans.

As The New York Times reported, the goal of the meeting was to negotiate a solution for the nearly 800,000 beneficiaries of the so-called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, an initiative introduced by former US president Barack Obama (2009-2017) to protect so-called “dreamers”— undocumented foreigners who arrived in the US as children—from deportation. Late last year, Trump ordered an end to the DACA program. During the meeting, Trump told Democrats that in exchange for maintaining DACA, he wants them to approve funds for the wall he hopes to erect along the border with Mexico.

Trump made known his opinions about Central American, Caribbean, and African immigrants during his campaign for the presidency in 2016. And starting last November, he put those ideas into action by announcing an end to Temporary Protected Status (TPS) permits for immigrants from El Salvador (200,000), Haiti (59,000), Nicaragua (5,300), and Sudan (1,100) ([NotiCen, Nov. 30, 2017](#), and [Jan. 25, 2018](#)).

The TPS program was first introduced during the presidency of George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) and was offered, at different moments, to foreign nationals who were deemed unable to safely return to their home country because of ongoing armed conflict or natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in Central America (1998) and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

### Mocking Mexico

“It took Trump just one year to reach a level of mistrust and apathy in the region that is unprecedented in modern times,” an analyst for BBC Mundo wrote on Jan. 22. And it doesn’t end with Trump’s decision to end visa protections for hundreds of thousands of immigrants, or his profanity-laden comments about certain countries, the writer added. There’s also his trade policy: He pulled the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with various Latin American and Asian countries ([SourceMex, April 26, 2017](#)) and has threatened to destroy the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada ([SourceMex, Oct. 18, 2017](#)).

On top of that is his insistence on building a wall along the US border with Mexico—the “number one most dangerous country in the world,” Trump said at one point. The president even contradicted his own chief of staff, John Kelly, saying via Twitter that, “The wall will be paid for, directly or indirectly, or through longer term reimbursement, by Mexico, which has a ridiculous US \$71 billion trade surplus with the US.” The wall’s US\$20 billion price tag is “peanuts,” he added, compared to what Mexico makes through its NAFTA dealings with the US. “NAFTA is a bad joke!” Trump concluded.

Complicating relations even more, the BBC Mundo article pointed out, is the fact that Trump still hasn’t assembled a State Department team for Western Hemispheric affairs. The one arguably positive gesture the US president made toward Latin America in his first year came during the UN General Assembly gathering in September, when he invited the presidents of Brazil, Colombia, and Panama, and the vice president of Argentina, to a working dinner in New York City. “But not even that meeting followed along normal lines,” the British news service noted.

Citing information from the news website Politico, the article said Trump expressed surprise, during the dinner, at the region’s opposition to the use of military force in Venezuela, and asked his guests if they were sure about their position. The invitees were surprised, in turn, by the US president’s ignorance on regional affairs.

Also unclear to the governments of Latin America is why the Trump administration would have a negative attitude even toward an unconditional ally like Argentina, led by Mauricio Macri, a pro-business conservative. On Jan. 12, the US Department of State characterized Argentina as a dangerous country, warning US tourists about the risks they run there and encouraging US diplomats to attend a High Threat Security Overseas Seminar (HTSOS) before traveling to the South American nation.

### Vexed by Venezuela

The Summit of the Americas, to be held April 13-14 in Lima, Peru, could be an opportunity for Trump to improve his image. A recent Gallup poll suggests that in Latin America, the average level of approval toward the US government fell from 49%, during the last year of the Obama administration, to 24% now.

Until now, at least, the White House has been ineffective on the diplomatic front. Obsessed with bringing about a rapid end to the government in Venezuela, the president and the secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, have turned deaf ears to the opinions of analysts throughout the world, including in the US, and continue to push a military option that few countries are willing to support. The principle of non-intervention in internal affairs holds sway throughout Latin America, including in countries led by authoritarian or de facto governments.

In August 2017, on a lightning tour that took him to Colombia, Argentina, Chile, and Panama, US Vice President Mike Pence failed to rally support ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)). More recently, during the first week of February, Tillerson was equally unsuccessful during visits to Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and Jamaica.

Trump's focus in Latin America is on Venezuela, and nothing else. And so far, beyond the criticisms made by some governments and the desire of others (Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay) that sanctions be applied to Venezuela, the only thing his administration has accomplished is the creation of the so-called Grupo de Lima. And the only thing that group of 12 governments—some of dubious origin (Brazil and Honduras) or under investigation for corruption (Peru)—has accomplished is to persuade the government of Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (as host of the Americas Summit) to rescind Venezuela's invitation. All that did, though, was spark outrage from Uruguay (a friend of Washington) and Bolivia (an enemy), which insisted on dialogue over weapons and raised doubts about their own participation in the summit.

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