

Dissension on Cuba

Bill Vann
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While Fidel Castro was not invited to the Santiago summit, because Washington vetoed his presence, the issue of Cuba was never far from the agenda. Canada and a number of Latin American governments made it clear they have no intention of bowing to the US trade embargo against the Caribbean nation. Clinton stood virtually alone in opposing Cuba's eventual participation in a free trade area of the Americas.

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien said his government's policy was to "reintegrate Cuba into the region." Within a week of the summit he paid a two-day visit to the island, where he joined Castro in cutting the ribbon on a new Canadian-built terminal at Havana's airport. Canada has become Cuba's leading trade and investment partner, with more than \$500 million in two-way trade in 1997 and nearly \$450 million in direct investment. US displeasure over Chretien's imminent visit to Cuba was evident at the summit, where Canada merited not a single mention in Clinton's speeches.

A number of Latin American leaders expressed their opinion that Cuba should be invited to the next summit meeting. Trade and finance ministers from these countries also made it clear they did not intend to let US sanctions prevent business interests in their countries from seeking profits on the island.

Meanwhile, Clinton's rhetoric about a free market from Alaska to Tierra Del Fuego rang hollow, given that he came to the Santiago summit having failed to convince the US Congress to give him the "fast track" authority to negotiate trade agreements with the countries of the hemisphere. While Washington remains paralyzed on this issue, the Latin American countries have gone ahead without the US, signing free trade agreements between themselves and a bilateral treaty between the Mercosur, the southern cone trade zone, and the European Union.



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