

Summit of the Americas: An exercise in hypocrisy and political amnesia

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29 April 1998

The Summit of the Americas, held April 18-19 in Santiago, Chile, brought together all of the hemisphere's heads of state—with the exception of Cuba's Fidel Castro—under the banners of “free trade” and “democracy.”

Santiago, the site chosen for the meeting, will soon mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of one of the bloodiest military coups in Latin America's history. Today Chile is touted as a model of free market capitalism, where everything from pensions to health care has been privatized and investment funds are able to reap a high rate of return.

The central theme of the summit was the self-congratulatory claim that Latin America has made enormous strides in two areas—the installation of elected civilian governments and the implementation of free market “reforms.” Now, the assembled presidents concurred, the task was to build upon these ostensible achievements.

Clinton served as the master of ceremonies for the gathering. The US president postured as the champion of democracy, adopting the tone of a sympathetic big brother who had watched in anguish as his less fortunate Latin American siblings suffered the effects of poverty and dictatorship.

The highpoint of Clinton's performance came in an address to the Chilean parliament in Valparaiso. There he invoked the phrase “never again” in relation to the dictatorship that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Chilean workers, peasants and students. He even quoted a line from the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a supporter of the Communist Party, who died in the immediate aftermath of the coup.

Neruda's verse, “All our dreams are only one,” was written to express the solidarity of the Chilean workers and oppressed. In the context of the US president's

address and his audience, however, it symbolized the agreement of Wall Street and Latin America's ruling classes on creating the optimum conditions for extracting profit from the continent's labor and natural resources.

Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean dictator who came to power in September 1973, had the good taste not to attend Clinton's speech to the Chilean legislature. He recently took a lifetime seat in the Chilean Senate, awarded him under the terms of a constitution which he imposed on the country during the period of military rule. But he excused himself from Clinton's appearance, saying he was ill.

It would have been unseemly for this living reminder of America's all too recent past to have been present. He would only have served as a jarring testimonial to the role that Washington has played for an entire century, not only in Chile, but throughout the hemisphere.

Pinochet came to power in a coup that was planned in the closest collaboration with the US Central Intelligence Agency. His seizure of power was backed not only by the Nixon administration, but also by major US-based multinationals with interests in Chile, such as ITT and Kennicott Copper. Then-CIA Director William Colby defended the mass executions in Chile's soccer stadiums, declaring them the only way to “avoid a civil war.”

Clinton, of course, mentioned none of this in his speeches celebrating the supposed rebirth of democracy in Latin America. Nor was there a hint of the long record of US imperialism in Latin America, going back to the beginning of the century and continuing after the coup in Chile.

In a display of hypocrisy remarkable even by the standards of imperialist politicians, Clinton spoke of

the “fragile” state of democracy in Latin America, without referring to the long record of US military intervention and intrigue on the continent. From 1954, when the CIA organized the overthrow of Guatemala’s President Jacabo Arbenz, to the military coup against Brazilian President Joao Goulart in 1964 and the subsequent seizures of power by military regimes in Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and throughout Central America, not a single right-wing dictatorship ruled in Latin America without the active support of the Pentagon and the US State Department.

Clinton’s remarks not only buried this history, but also obscured the connections between the “democratic” present and the dictatorial past. The coming to power of civilian regimes in Latin America has not erased the effects of the US-backed dictatorships that ruled the region.

Included among the new “democratic” leaders praised by Clinton was Alberto Fujimori, who closed down Peru’s parliament and has continued to rule the country by military means. Also attending the summit was Hugo Banzer, Bolivia’s present elected president, who formerly headed the country’s bloodiest military dictatorship.

The foundations for all Latin America’s so-called free trade democracies were laid in the decades of military repression. The mass murder, torture and imprisonment carried out in Chile and elsewhere, together with the proxy wars which Washington sponsored in Central America, had a central purpose—to crush the revolutionary strivings of the Latin American working class.

Repressed by these regimes and betrayed by their Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships, the workers of Latin America have seen their living standards decimated and the limited social gains won by earlier generations taken away. Throughout Latin America, real wages have been cut in half over the past two decades. More than 210 million people live below the official poverty line.

Social polarization has never been wider in the continent’s history. The richest 20 percent of the population receive nearly 20 times the wealth that goes to the poorest 20 percent. And, according to a report issued by the Organization of American States on the eve of the summit, in a number of Latin American countries more than 50 percent of the national income

goes into the pockets of the wealthiest 10 percent.

The heads of state, government officials and businessmen with whom Clinton met in Santiago are the direct beneficiaries of this immense transfer of wealth from the working class and the oppressed masses to the wealthiest sectors of society. That is why none of them felt any inclination to contradict Clinton’s attempt to portray Washington as the champion of freedom in the hemisphere.

Nonetheless, the assembled presidents were forced to acknowledge that “the suppression of poverty is the greatest challenge confronting our hemisphere.” Their official declaration stated: “We are conscious that the growth witnessed in the Americas in recent years has not resolved the problem of inequality and social exclusion. We are determined to eliminate the barriers to bringing to the poor access to adequate nutrition, social services, a healthier environment, access to credit and possession of their properties.”

No one at the summit advanced any proposals which could even begin to realize these goals. As in his recent trip to Africa, Clinton proposed a handful of token aid programs. The issue of forgiving Latin America’s foreign debt, which continues to bleed the continent of resources, was never even considered.

Meanwhile, even as the summit was under way, there were indications that mounting social tensions are producing the conditions for a renewal of violent class confrontations and military interventions. In Paraguay, unusual troop movements on the final day of the summit raised fears of a military coup as the country’s constitutional crisis deepened. And Colombia continued to be rocked by workers’ strikes and protests over the assassination of left-wing leaders and the country’s most prominent human rights lawyer.



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