Bush speech on Latin America—defense of a failed policy

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In a speech in Washington on Wednesday, President George W. Bush delivered what amounted to a defense of the manifestly failed and rudderless policy that his administration has pursued in Latin America since coming to office more than seven years ago.

His remarks included the usual litany of right-wing orthodoxies in relation to the region: denunciations of Cuba, support for the free market and free trade as the sole solutions to Latin America's endemic poverty and inequality, and backing for the continued "war on drugs."

The American president chose a reliably sympathetic audience for what amounted to his swan song on Latin American policy: the Council of the Americas, a front for US corporations that describes itself as a "business organization whose members share a common commitment to free trade and open markets throughout the Americas."

Bush began by announcing that he had spoken the day before to three of the US-backed "dissidents" whose operations in Cuba are paid for and coordinated with Washington. He described the discussion, organized via a videoconference organized from the US Interests Section in Havana, as an "inspiring moment for me."

The main thrust of his remarks was—in the wake of Fidel Castro's stepping down as Cuba's president—to categorically rule out any loosening of the economic embargo that the US has exercised against the island nation for nearly half a century and that has been significantly tightened under Bush's own administration.

He dismissed a set of so-called reforms announced recently by Fidel Castro's successor—his brother Raul—as "meaningless gestures." The measures include the redistribution of state lands to private farmers, allowing the sale of greater amounts of food at market prices, the tying of wages to productivity and the lifting of restrictions on the sale of consumer goods like cell phones, computers and home appliances. Together they clearly indicate a turn towards the strengthening of private property and the role of foreign capital in Cuba.

"Some in the world marveled that perhaps change is on its way," Bush said. "That's not how I view it. Until there's a change of heart and a change of compassion, and a change of how the Cuban government treats its people, there's no change at all."

Bush indicated that he would demonstrate his commitment to heart and compassion by maintaining the draconian restrictions that he imposed on the ability of Cuban nationals residing in the US to visit and send remittances to their families on the island.

"If Cuba wants to join the community of civilized nations, then Cuba's rulers must begin a process of peaceful democratic change," continued Bush, who invoked the "Almighty" as the source of "freedom."

He demanded that the Cuban government "respect the human rights in word and in deed." This is more than a bit rich coming from the head of a government that is reviled around the globe for the use of torture, extraordinary rendition and the holding of tens of thousands of people without charges in military and CIA prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world. Indeed, Bush spoke on the same day that the US military began its kangaroo court proceedings at the US naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba against individuals it has held without charges there for six years, including a Canadian seized when he was a 15 years old child and subjected to torture. Those convicted in these rigged proceedings could be put to death.

Turning to the "war on drugs," the US president pressed for Congress to pass a $1.4 billion anti-drug-trafficking package known as the Merida Initiative, which would provide arms, training and other US assistance to the Mexican army, which is being used increasingly by the right-wing government of President Felipe Calderón to support the suppression of strikes and protests and to impose a law-and-order regime on the country.

The Democratic-led Congress is expected to include the first $550 million installment on the Merida Initiative in the $178 million Iraq war funding package that it is currently preparing.

After dealing with his key priorities of Cuba and drugs, the American president acknowledged that "social justice" is also a concern in Latin America. Noting that one out of every four of Latin America's nearly 550 million people survives on less than $2 a day, while millions are denied access to adequate health care and education, Bush declared: "This is a problem that the United States must take seriously. As the most prosperous country in the world, the United States is reaching out to help our partners improve the lives of their citizens."

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As evidence of its "seriousness" and "reaching out" Bush cited sporadic tours of the region by US military doctors and $300 million—less than what Washington is spending on the war in Iraq every single day—that the US has provided for education programs in the region over the last four years.

He likewise defended tying aid to Latin America to so-called Millennium Challenge Accounts, which condition assistance to governments adopting free-market capitalist policies and open doors to US trade and investment. "I don't think it's too much to ask for a government to accept marketplace economics," said Bush.

The rest of his speech was devoted to his faltering campaign to secure a free trade pact between the US and Colombia. The administration submitted the pact to Congress last month at the last possible moment to have it approved before it adjourns in September, a tactic aimed at forcing it onto "fast track" ratification. The Democratic leadership, however, moved to table the treaty, seeking for electoral purposes to divert growing concern over the plunging US economy along nationalist lines.

Bush once again cast the trade treaty as an "urgent national security priority," calling Colombia "one of our strongest allies in the Western Hemisphere."

The US president continued: "I admire President Uribe a lot. He is courageous. He shares our values."

No doubt, there is a good deal of truth in these remarks. Colombia's Uribe is personally under investigation for his alleged role in organizing the massacre of villagers by right-wing paramilitaries. His cousin Mario Uribe, a key political ally, has been arrested for complicity with the paramilitary death squads, and at least 54 members of Uribe's ruling coalition in parliament are either under arrest or under investigation on similar charges.

With less than seven months left in office, Bush is hardly likely to make another trip to Latin America, a region where he is widely hated. On his last trip in March of 2007, he was met with mass demonstrations wherever he went.

The speech to the Council on the Americas only highlighted what a threadbare legacy he leaves in terms of advancing US strategic interests in a region Washington long regarded as its "own backyard." Focused almost entirely on pursuing its US colonial-style war in Iraq and attempting to assert US hegemony in the Middle East, the Bush administration has largely ignored Latin America.

Under conditions of a relative decline of US influence, China has cemented increasing economic ties to the region, with Latin American-Chinese trade increasing to over $100 billion last year, a 46 percent rise over 2006. The European Union, for its part, is in the process of designating Mexico as a "strategic partner," a relationship that it has already established with Brazil. The EU has doubled its own trade with the region since 1990 and has been its biggest source of foreign direct investment as well as the largest donor of development assistance to Latin America.

Meanwhile, Latin American capital has itself become a source of increasing foreign investments. Brazil, for example, invested $28.2 billion overseas in 2006, more than the $18.8 billion in foreign investment it took in.

It is this sharp shift in the economic balance of power that has provided an objective base of support for the emergence of governments that have distanced themselves from Washington and adopted the rhetoric of nationalism, populism and even "socialism" in an attempt to divert the genuinely anti-capitalist sentiments of Latin America's working class and poor masses.

Within the ruling elite itself, there are rumblings over the ineptitude of the Bush administration's policy in the region, with a growing proliferation of articles in policy journals with titles like "who lost Latin America?"

Even among the president's big business audience on Wednesday there were no doubt more than a few who chafed at his insistence that the developments in Cuba were meaningless and that Washington would make no changes in its own course. Sections of American agribusiness, the tourist industry and finance capital have all expressed growing dissatisfaction with a blockade that prevents them from profiting off of the island's resources and cheap labor, under conditions in which European, Canadian and Chinese capital is being invested there.

US Cuban policy could well become an issue in the 2008 election. Democratic presidential front-runner Senator Barack Obama has called it a "strategic blunder" and said that he was prepared to talk with Raul Castro. The Republicans' presumptive candidate Senator John McCain called this openness to talks "dangerously naïve."

Obama's concrete proposals, however, are exceedingly cautious. He is advocating only the lifting of the Bush administration's restriction on Cuban-Americans visiting their relatives on the island once every three years, while capping remittances they send to the island at $100 per month, measures that are unpopular among the majority of the Cuban-American community in Florida. He has not proposed lifting the economic embargo that has been in effect since the beginning of the 1960s.

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