

The United States' Failure In Latin America

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By Thomas Lahey

The world changed remarkably in 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War prompted a shift in global security and diplomatic policy that led to increased focus on the Middle East and East Asia. The 1990's saw the United States engage in war against Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait, humanitarian efforts in Somalia, air strikes in former Yugoslavia, maintenance of a no fly-zone over Iraq, and endure terrorist attacks on its embassy in Kenya and the U.S.S. Cole in 2000.

The shift away from the Cold War politics of the 1950s-1980s inevitably led to a loss of focus on the events unfolding in Latin America. The U.S., since its infancy as a nation, has regarded Latin America as a region of significant importance and remained committed to the affairs of Latin America well into the late 1980's.

The presidency of James Monroe incorporated a specific U.S. interest in its Latin American neighbours. In 1823, President Monroe issued what is known as the Monroe Doctrine, a policy of opposing European colonialism in the Americas and declaring that further efforts by European nations to take control of any independent state in North or South America would be viewed as "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." This policy was announced in support of the independence movements that saw many former colonies of Spain and Portugal gain sovereignty from their former European rulers.



Former President of Cuba Fidel Castro.

Though not forcefully invoked until the 1890's, the Doctrine laid the foundation for Latin America being regarded as within the U.S. sphere of influence. The Panama Canal was built in 1914. The United States fought its war against Spain and forced the French out of Mexico, and since the post WWII-era, was engaged in counter-revolutionary action throughout the region.

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy remained committed to a focus on Latin American affairs. Besides the Cuban Revolution of the 1950's and 60's, the U.S. was involved in countering Soviet influence in Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay, and Grenada. The Nixon Administration supported the military governments of Pinochet in Chile and junta in Argentina. The Reagan Administration initiated the War on Drugs in Colombia and supported Bogota against the FARC rebels. President George H.W. Bush ordered the invasion of Panama in 1989 to depose a dictator and the CIA was involved in counter-intelligence in Nicaragua.

This is all to say that the U.S. used to be *very* involved in Latin America.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Latin America seemingly lost its strategic importance. Since 1991, the United States has intervened in Haiti in 1994 to depose its dictator and handed over the peacekeeping operation to the U.N. in 1995. The U.S. helped with disaster relief in Haiti in 2004. Otherwise, Latin America has been widely ignored, yet the suffering of its people under repressive regimes continue. The most involvement the U.S. displayed in Latin American affairs during the George W. Bush Administration was to continue the fight against narco-terrorism in Colombia and to push Mexico and Central American states to help stem the flow of migrants into the U.S. by way of its southern border.

Cuba and Venezuela are prime examples of nations where U.S. leadership could, today, end the suffering of millions of people. Since Castro came to power in 1959, the U.S. policy has been to isolate the island nation and completely embargo any trade. This, invariably, has led to limited access to goods and a stagnant economy. Of course, the embargo was not initially without cause: Castro had aligned himself with the U.S.S.R. and allowed the Russians to move missiles onto the island. Cuba supported the guerrilla terrorism of Che Guevara and funded and armed the FARC rebels in Colombia. However, the embargo, initially justified in an attempt to bring the Castro regime to its knees by cutting off its access to foreign investment, has not achieved its stated end, as the Castro regime remains in power to this day (albeit under Raúl Castro, following the passing of Fidel in 2016).

President Barack Obama began the process of normalising relations between the United States and Cuba in 2015 with the goal of full diplomatic relations and trade between the two nations. Whatever view one may hold

about the Castro regime and their support for terrorist organisations in the 1970's and 80's, the thaw hostilities between Washington and Havana is a positive step towards the U.S. re-engaging in a region that has been largely ignored since the early 1990's.



A woman walks between the empty shelves of a supermarket in Caracas on January 11, 2018. (JUAN BARRETO/AFP/Getty Images)

Venezuela, however, remains a dangerous outlier. Millions of Venezuelans have seen their economy plunge since Hugo Chavez came to power in 1999. Chavez ran on a platform of nationalisation of the oil industry and redistribution of that wealth to the rural poor. Instead, the over-reliance on oil revenue saw the government lose billions of dollars as the global price of oil plummeted in the mid-2000's. The Chavez regime controlled the media, turned the judiciary into an arm of his socialist party and used violent crackdowns on demonstrations throughout the country in opposition to moves towards a totalitarian state.

Student activist Heleny Quercia, a citizen of Venezuela, has been leading opposition protests against both the Chavez – and now Maduro – regimes. “There are certainly more things that the International Community can do to prevent a genocide which might happen if the International Community does nothing about the crimes against humanity that are perpetrated by the regime,” Ms. Quercia said. “I think that the US should talk to the members of the CARICOM (Caribbean states). They receive much aid from [Venezuela], and have a trading relationship.”

Despite Venezuela's close economic ties to many of its Latin American neighbours, including Cuba and Bolivia, the nation is starving. “About 80% of Venezuelans live in poor conditions, meaning that they do not eat 3 times a day and have no access to services,” explains Ms. Quercia. “My people are starving.”

Medical supplies are in short supply. Venezuelans queue outside grocery stores at the early hours of the morning, only to realise that most of the

shelves are empty. “The US and democratic nations must aim a food aid intervention because this situation might become like Somalia if it is not stopped,” argues Ms. Quercia. What else can be done? Many in the student opposition have called on the U.S. to impose harsher sanctions on top individuals in the Maduro regime and have expressed a desire to see entities like the U.N. or the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank take strong action to punish the Maduro regime for its repressive measures.

Others argue that it’s the people, not the government, that will pay the price for harsher sanctions. Francisco Rodríguez of [Foreign Policy Magazine](#) writes “economic sanctions are ostensibly intended to raise costs for the military and are expected to somehow spur a rebellion against Maduro.” However, “recent data show that in the two months after Trump imposed financial sanctions, imports tumbled an additional 24 percent, deepening the scarcity of basic goods and lending credibility to the government’s argument that U.S. policies are directly harming Venezuelans.”

The argument cuts two ways. However, what must be addressed is that the U.S. engagement in Venezuela is limited to sanctions. Instead of supporting the opposition – either financially or through the use of diplomatic channels – the U.S. has remained on the sidelines whilst millions of Venezuelans starve, die from a lack of medicine, and are beaten and imprisoned for their protests against the Maduro regime.

Much was said of President Obama’s decision not to vocally support the Iranian protestors in 2014. The Administration had secretly been negotiating with Tehran on a deal to halt its nuclear proliferation in an effort to prevent Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon. One could only hope that the silence from supporting opposition in Venezuela was similarly the result of backroom negotiation between the U.S. and Venezuela to oust the regime and provide much needed aid to its people. Latin America needs the U.S. to step-up its engagement in the region. Not by supporting its own flavour of repressive regimes, such as Pinochet and the junta, but by striving for democratic revival and economic prosperity in a region that policy-makers have largely written-off as irrelevant. Latin America cannot afford to be overlooked by America anymore.

Thomas Lahey is the Senior International Correspondent for Parliament Street. He lives in the New York City area and is in Rutgers Law School having recently graduated from The Catholic University of America, in Washington DC. His areas of focus are foreign affairs, European politics and European Union policy issues, as well as American politics and policy.