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US Hegemony in Latin America

by Renee Parsons

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While the 'misconduct' of Secret Service agents with prostitutes in Colombia is a significant, if titillating scandal, most media reports have missed the tectonic political shift that **surfaced** at the recent Summit of the Americas meeting.

The **Summit**, an offshoot of the Organization of American States organized in 1948, consists of 35 western hemisphere nations that meet on a tri-annual basis with the U.S. historically setting the agenda since the summit's inception in 1994.

The president arrived, smooth and impeccable, with, no doubt, the expectation of encouraging new investment and trade initiatives at the first business seminar conducted since the Summits began. Attending were over three hundred U.S. business executives with Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue in attendance **to push** for a free trade deal with Brazil. Once China **began out-hustling** the U.S. for its share of the global pie in Latin America and as the U.S. bogged down in a decade of war with an enduring economic catastrophe on its hands, Summit countries took the opportunity to readjust their vision of Uncle Sam's once omnipotent authority. That readjusted vision has offered a measure of independence from U.S. trade markets as well as U.S. domination on policy decisions. While not known for its historical memory, the U.S. does not usually react kindly to previously compliant nations flexing their sovereign muscles, **U.S. AID** to Latin American and the Caribbean at \$1.3 billion in 2010 will most likely provide the necessary tether for continued cooperation.

Out of left field, the president's usual razzle dazzle charm offensive so successful at his first summit in 2009 ran into a brick wall amid deep contentious divisions that had been brewing since the previous summit. In what may be karmic payback for one hundred and fifty years of U.S. policy imposed on Latin America, 32 nations [supported](#) a resolution that Cuba be allowed to attend the 2015 summit with only the U.S. and the reliable Canadians voting against. Cuba had been expelled from the OAS in 1962 with the beginning of 50 years of economic sanctions and was readmitted in 2009 but not invited to the summit.

In an amiable display of hubris, the president dug in his heels insisting that Cuba cannot attend since it has "[not yet moved to democracy](#)" and [is still](#) a "single party state" meaning no adversarial political parties. As Obama spoke of democracy, the irony of the U.S. undermining democratically elected Latin American heads of state and now requiring democracy as a condition for membership must have been subject for some sarcasm among current summit leaders. A summit rule adopted in 2001 required each participant to respect the rule of law as a 'democratic' country although Mexico, which [had been](#) a regular Summit participant since 1994, achieved real democracy only in 2000. How well each participant respects the rule of law and encourages robust political partisan debate may rest in the eye of the beholder.

It is curious that American leaders expect its citizens and other nations to not connect the dots when it comes to its own double standards. It would be educational to know how the U.S. would justify applying the summit's democracy rule to China, our third largest trading partner, or to Saudi Arabia, our favorite importer of petroleum, neither known as guiding lights for justice or equality. If the democratic standard is that a majority vote carries the day and since an overwhelming majority of summit nations adopted the Cuban resolution, how is democracy served when a minority of two have the power to challenge that resolution's implementation and how is it that one nation gets to decide who is invited? Therein lies the problem for U.S. foreign policy around the world -- that other nations and its people are capable of 'seeing' beyond the pretense.

As a backdrop for atmosphere at the summit, the experience of Bolivia is informative. In 2008, the Bush Administration suspended 'trade preferences' including duty free status for Bolivia [alleging an](#) insufficient effort to stop drug trafficking. The move came less than a month after Bolivian President Evo Morales accused the U.S. Ambassador of fomenting violence and upheaval with right wing opposition groups. In expelling the envoy, Morales [accused](#) the U.S. of an attack on a gas pipeline and initiating an assassination conspiracy. With the election of Barack Obama, diplomatic relations between the two countries were set back when the Bush suspension was made permanent, [costing](#) Bolivia 20,000 non-drug industry related jobs and \$278 million in exports. The coca leaf is legal in Bolivia as a tea and for religious and cultural purposes.

If the discussion on Cuba was not a forewarning of a challenge to its authority, the U.S. response to decriminalizing drugs must have been especially irksome to nation who has lived with years of massive violence and corruption from the drug cartels. Fareed Zakaria [reported](#) Sunday on CNN that Mexico had suffered an unbelievable 50,000 drug related deaths in the last six years.

While U.S. strategy at the Summit may be viewed as a metaphor for American pursuit of obsolete Cold War objectives around the world, the president [offered](#) little more than platitudes

and some confusion with his categorical [statement that](#) "For the sake of the health and safety of our citizens -- all our citizens -- the United States will not be going in this direction."

It remains a puzzle as to why Obama, greeted as a rock star at the 2009 summit, left no room for negotiation on an issue that isolates the U.S. from many of its south-of-the-border allies and causes great anguish for millions of American families. With over two million incarcerated and another five million on probation, the U.S. [can claim](#) to have the most citizens in jail for drug-related offenses than any other country in the world.

Latin American leaders have raised the issue with the U.S. in the past when the former presidents of Mexico, Colombia and Brazil called for decriminalization of marijuana in 2009. The U.S. drug policy, which [has spent](#) \$25 billion on ineffectual crop eradication and border interdiction efforts as it has encouraged a militarization of the failed war on drugs, the president's 'new environment of cooperation' hit a serious ditch in the road as the U.S. and Canada objected to a consensus document preferring the 'reduce-demand' theory reminiscent of Nancy Reagan's Just Say No campaign.

In what has been deemed a setback for the U.S., the sixth Summit of the Americas faltered to an unhappy conclusion for all participants with President Morales and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff [predicting](#) no future summits without Cuba.

The president seriously misread the mood in the hemisphere, especially in an awkward moment when he [said](#) "Sometimes I feel as if... we're caught in a time warp, going back to the 1950s, gunboat diplomacy, and Yankees and the Cold War, and so forth, and not addressing the world we live in."

That was, Mr. President, exactly the problem at Cartagena. The Summit wants to move forward into the 21st Century but it is the United States that [clings to the past](#) as it resists the will of the majority.