

Implications for Latin America in presidential vote

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

As the United States gears up for this year's presidential election, candidates from both sides, but particularly Democrats, need to be addressing issues related to Latin America.

While the September 11th terrorist attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have understandably absorbed much of the nation's attention, candidates from both sides need to recognize that Spanish-speaking Hispanics now make up the largest minority in this country and are developing into a potent political force, particularly in the Democratic Party. And for them, Latin America is close to their heart and their vote.

President George W. Bush highlighted his interest in Latin America by making his first foreign visit to Mexico. Bush, who speaks Spanish, indicated that he would place Latin American issues near the top of his foreign policy agenda.

Subsequent events intervened; nevertheless, the president has made several visits to Latin America and recently took steps to repair strained relations with Mexico and other Latin countries that opposed his military venture into Iraq.

In contrast, a cursory survey of John Kerry's web site finds numerous references to foreign policy issues such as Promoting American Security in the 21st Century, Securing Afghanistan, Winning the Peace in Iraq, Promoting Democracy and Respect for Human Rights and Fighting HIV/AIDS.

The last two involve issues directly affect Latin countries, but none of the statements come close to mentioning the region.

There are reasons in addition to winning the Hispanic vote that ought to compel the candidates to pay attention to events transpiring to the south.

- The on-going instability in Venezuela, one of this country's major and most reliable suppliers of petroleum, has thrust its left-leaning president Hugo Chavez into the spotlight. Chavez's erratic governing and friendship with Cuba's aging leader Fidel Castro could foreshadow a renewal of support for disruptive anarchist groups and leftist dictators throughout the region.
- Castro himself recently turned 77 and is showing signs of slowing down. It is very possible that the next presidential term could coincide with a regime change in our near neighbor that could have untold political, economic and human implications for the United States.
- The election of left-leaning presidents in Brazil and Ecuador along with strong indications of rising left-wing indigenous influence in many of the Andean countries such as Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador could indicate major changes in governments and a radical turn away from good relations with the United States. A change from traditional oligarchical rule could come violently with a resulting flood of refugees seeking asylum in the United States.

- The on-going guerrilla insurgency in Colombia along with possible Middle Eastern and Al Qaeda terrorist cells reported in the tri-border area of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina, present the threat of terrorism exported to the United States through our neighbors to the south. Some Colombian guerrilla groups have recently threatened to carry attacks on their fellow countrymen onto U.S. soil where many exiles have fled.
- Economic disparity between rich and poor, long a hallmark of the Latin American matrix, continues to lead to frustration and the flow of undocumented workers across the border, primarily from Mexico. The expectations raised by various Free Trade agreements and images portrayed by U.S. movies and cable television encourage even more to seek relocation here where the assumption is that wealth is easily obtained.
- Economic collapses in Mexico, Ecuador and Argentina and a near collapse in Brazil during the past few years have demonstrated the instability of many Latin American economies and the affect that they can have on U.S. economic development. To ignore economic turmoil in Latin America can lead to residual negative economic effects and encourages further political and social instability on our own doorstep.
- Recent political upheavals in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as growing frustration in Cuba threaten to unleash a wave of new boat people washing up on the shores of Florida and Puerto Rico. A massive attempt at uncontrolled immigration could be costly economically and in terms of human life as well as politically to whoever is president if it is perceived as being handled badly.
- Other hot-button issues include a worsening border dispute between Bolivia and Chile, proposals to legalize the cultivation of coca leaf in countries such as Peru and Bolivia, increasing frustration with the perceived unsatisfactory results of democracy and globalization, complaints about unfair American tariffs, up to three million internally-dislocated refugees in Colombia and the supply of cocaine and other illegal drugs from Colombia through channels in Mexico and the Caribbean.

Latin America is our country's largest export market, a source of much of our cheap labor, and a political time bomb fueled by poverty, political instability, corruption, and lack of attention by the United States.

It would well behoove both presidential candidates to consider Latin American issues. That concern could go a long way to ameliorating potential problems and just might help to secure the crucial Hispanic vote.

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