

Averting future Haitis

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As the conflict in Iraq continues percolating, and the war on terrorism stumbles along, America's own hemisphere moves into a new round of turmoil virtually unnoticed. The State Department and Pentagon seemingly ignore the signals of change coming from Mexico to Argentina, as they bumble with the convoluted agenda before them.

Clearly, President Bush's regional foreign policy is collapsing, not because he lacks a vision but because many political appointees and bureaucrats have ignored his direction and have been glacial or even opposed in their responses.

Ten years of intense U.S. involvement in Central America under Ronald Reagan and the elder George Bush pulled most of those countries from Fidel Castro's leftist philosophy, to segue into more democratic and capitalist mode.

During that same period, America saw the first measures of temporary traction in the drug war. However, with the benign neglect and temporary bandages of the Clinton years, as in the case of Haiti in 1994, coupled with implementation of the loosely knit North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), cascading disintegration became apparent as U.S. jobs went south and more illegal immigrants and drugs came north.

Now, after three years of the younger George Bush's administration, the same lack of substantive and effective sociopolitical, economic and security actions reflect a reversal of fortunes in Latin America. This is illustrated by these current quintessential examples: the Chinese leases of the intelligence collection dishes in Cuba, the implosion of Haiti after America's \$3 billion effort there, the complete fragmentation of Mexico into various economic and drug fiefdoms, the rise of the extreme left FMLN Party in El Salvador, the Chinese influence in Panama, the expansion of the Colombian NARCO-Guerrilla FARC and their merger with contemporaries in the ELN, the Chinese and Cuban propping up of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, rebirth of the Inca-based Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the leftist electoral victories of Brazil, and the economic blowout of Argentina, just to name some.

President James Monroe's ideas of our hemisphere free from outside influences, President John Kennedy's view of U.S. prosperity related to our neighbors' stability, and our current president's belief we must proactively promote democracy and free enterprise in Latin America should be the keystones of our foreign policy. The executive and legislative branches should rush to incorporate that policy.

Simply put, in foreign affairs, our neighbors should get our first priority. Our largess should focus on them so it will not go unnoticed, unappreciated, dismissed or denigrated as easily as in elsewhere. American attentions should be viewed in radiating concentric circles, except, for example, on national security matters, protecting resource bases or market places.

We cannot be everything to everyone always. Our country may be titled the "maximum superpower," but we do not have the capability to serve 192 other countries. Therefore, we must focus our finite labors.

Of course, there are competing elements that draw resources and attention. Places like the Middle East, Africa and Asia are important, but not to the point where those near and dear to us, in proximity and purpose, are stiff-armed or ignored.

Recently, a parliamentarian from Latin America met with representatives of this foundation. His message was that the Cubans and Chinese are moving aggressively to garner influence throughout the region, while America seems impervious to cries for attention. This legislator was alarmed at the machinations of Venezuela and Mexico in particular - as he saw it, the model for his and other countries' downfall. He startled us by saying, "The phone is ringing, and the United States isn't answering."

Aside from leading by example, America should stir action and call for a purposeful emergency hemispheric summit. This summit should discuss trade, security, immigration and other appropriate issues and to develop voluntary tasks for all. The United States should attend this meeting even if antagonists like Mr. Castro and Mr. Chavez also come. This will prove America can compete in the "ideas" realm.

Personally, I could see President Bush "jawboning" U.S. antagonists into more reasonable positions in one-on-one meetings. Afterward, for our part, executive branch interagency sessions and collaborating legislative support groups should figure out what executive orders or laws can be developed or rescinded to update and streamline America's interaction with our neighbors.

Efforts such as this could prevent future dynamic and cyclic failures like Haiti. Regardless of the format for action, doing something effective and less-expensive now might avoid higher later costs, in lives, money, resources and "face" - when we can least afford them.

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