

Change in Washington and Relations with Latin America: The Sharp Edge of Resistance Slightly Blunted

By Arnold August, October 2011

As we continue to review the events surrounding the Summit of the Americas, we can also see how the “new face” policy is able to succeed, to a certain extent, because of the illusions allowed to fester. This takes place as a result of the persistent cobweb fibres that are spun in order to hide the nature of the two-party democracy in the U.S. This “new face” policy succeeds only *to a certain extent* because the mirages about the U.S. system are increasingly being shredded, given the rich experience being accumulated in areas such as Latin America. Obama presented his opening remarks on April 17 at the Summit, where he grossly understated, “We have at times ... sought to dictate our terms[,] but I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership,” there were reports of applause. Delegates also exhibited their approbation when he claimed that “I didn’t come here to debate the past — I came here to deal with the future.” His statement that “The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba” also got an ovation. When he played the African-American card, which at its very foundation is based on the mirage of the American Dream, by remarking that “my presence here indicates the United States has changed over time,” this was also met by handclapping. He deftly dealt with the problem of the growing Latin-American, anti-American perceptions, which so worried Brzezinski and Obama. The latter simultaneously offered both a lure and the barely veiled threat of retribution when he said that “the United States policy should not be interference in other countries, but that also means that we can’t blame the U.S. for every problem that arises in the hemisphere. That’s part of the bargain.”¹

At the closing of the Summit, Obama held a press conference in Trinidad and Tobago. In response to a correspondent’s question regarding the blockade against Cuba, the president reiterated the same position offered by the White House in the week leading up to the Summit and during the Summit itself, namely that “the policy that we’ve had in place for 50 years hasn’t worked the way *we* want it to. The Cuban people are not free”² (emphasis added). When Obama says “we,” he is obviously referring to all the U.S. administrations over the last 50 years, thus the only issue really at stake is the best way to have the blockade “work.”

In addition, the Summit issued a Declaration at its closure on April 19 that seemed to echo to a large extent U.S. foreign policy concerns with code words such as “democratic governance” and

“respect for human rights” as applied by the OAS Democratic Charter; moreover, the role of the OAS’ role in the “peaceful resolution of our differences” was enshrined.³ However, it also came to light, according to a Reuters report, that there was “no formal signing ceremony, as a group of mostly leftist presidents led by Chávez had previously rejected the document as deficient,” and along with others, such as the Bolivian, Nicaraguan and Honduran presidents, rejected it because it “failed to address Cuba’s exclusion from the summit.... The Summit’s host, Prime Minister Patrick Manning of Trinidad, said the declaration was adopted by consensus even though some refused to endorse it.”⁴

The mitigated success of the U.S. was reflected in the reports by some of the news media attending, even though it may be difficult to separate desires from reality. The Summit was “humming with good feelings projected by the young U.S. president.”⁵ BBC Mundo (BBC’s Spanish-language news service) introduced an interview with Obama White House Adviser Daniel Restrepo by writing that “none of the participants seem to doubt” that there is a “new dynamic” in U.S.–South American relations. According to Restrepo, this “has been achieved.” On the second day of the Summit, according to Reuters writers, “the warm reception for Obama from countries from Brazil to Venezuela contrasted with the last Summit of the Americas four years ago in Argentina, where leftists like Chávez attacked the ‘imperialist’ policies of former President George W. Bush,” the report highlighting the well-publicized event when a smiling Chávez approached a likewise beaming Obama and handed the latter the book by Eduardo Galeano *Open Veins of Latin America*.⁶ The events took place characterized by a cautious but positive assessment from the Obama administration, an evaluation that had some foundation based on reality. At the same time, former Vice-President Dick Cheney criticized Obama for shaking Chávez’s hand.⁷ This illustrates that the financial oligarchy was right in choosing Obama, because Obama’s “new face” approach is far more effective in pushing U.S. imperial domination than the old discredited policy and image as projected by Cheney. How does the Obama White House deal with, on the one hand, aggressive opposition toward Cuba for its “lack of democracy” and, on the other hand, the “respect” that would be expected from the U.S. for other countries, such as Venezuela, because their leaders are elected in multi-party suffrage? The interview with Jeffrey Davidow (Obama’s main adviser for the Summit) is quite revealing. His answer to the question has been repeated on multiple occasions by the Obama administration.

Todd [Chuck, NBC Political Director]: Do you guys view that Hugo Chávez is a democratically elected leader of Venezuela?

Davidow: We have real concerns about erosion of democratic principles in Venezuela and we've made that clear publicly in many ways. He was elected. He's been elected several times. We do worry about issues like freedom of speech, freedom of organization, lack of checks and balances in Venezuela. I'd say that you know the fact that the president was photographed shaking hands with him, a smile and a handshake does not mean a new relationship. We have a very strained relationship with Venezuela. We'd like to see it get better.

Todd: How does it get better? Is the ball in the proverbial court of Venezuela?

Davidow: Yeah, I think so.⁸

¹ Obama, Barack. 2009a. "Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony." White House (April 17). At <<http://whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-summit-americas-opening-ceremony>>.

² ———. 2009b. "Press Conference by the President." White House (April 19). At <<http://whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-trinidad-and-tobago-4192009>>.

³ Fifth Summit of the Americas. 2009. "Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain." (April 19). At <http://www.summit-americas.org/V_Summit/decl_comm_pos_en.pdf>.

⁴ Mason, Jeff, and David Alexander. 2009. "Obama Sees Signs of Better Cuba and Venezuela Ties." Reuters (April 19). At <<http://reuters.com/article/2009/04/19/us-summit-americas-idUSTRE53F58G20090419>>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alexander, David, and Ana Isabel Martinez. 2009. "Obama Wins Praise at Summit but Feels Heat on Cuba." Reuters (April 18). At <<http://reuters.com/article/2009/04/18/us-summit-americas-idUSTRE53F58G20090418>>.

⁷ Medios México. 2009. "Cheney critica apretón de manos de Chávez." (April 21). At <<http://mediosenmexico.blogspot.com/2009/04/cheney-critica-apreton-de-manos-de.html>>.

⁸ NBC News. 2009. "Obama Summit Adviser Interview." First Read on NBC News (April 18). At <http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2009/04/18/4436190-obama-summit-adviser-interview>.