

# Beyond the Four Freedoms: Obama and Sovereignty



Barack Obama addresses the Cuban American National Foundation in May. In addition to pledging to maintain the Cuban embargo, he said: "We will support Colombia's right to strike terrorists who seek safe haven across its borders."

By Greg Grandin

**T**O GET A SENSE OF WHAT BARACK OBAMA'S foreign policy will be, we should watch Latin America. The region has long lived like the proverbial canary in a coal mine, a reliable indicator of what's in store for the rest of the world when circumstances prompt Washington to shift diplomatic direction. There's been much talk lately about Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, some of it generated by Obama himself, who has cited FDR's Four Freedoms—of speech and religion and from want and fear—to signal what his diplomatic priorities will be. In fact, it was largely a result of Latin American pressure that New Dealers accepted what became the foundational premise of liberal multilateralism: a stated respect for the absolute sovereignty of individual nations.

But the region has most often served as a rehearsal space for more malignant debuts: John F. Kennedy responded to a militant third world

by launching the Alliance for Progress—which more correctly could be described as "nation-building by death squad," previewing in Colombia, Peru, and Central America what was to come in Vietnam. The failure of that strategy led Richard Nixon to first apply his namesake doctrine in the Western Hemisphere—that is, the backing of strongman proxies like Augusto Pinochet in order to secure U.S. interests. In the mid-1970s, the cumulative disasters of Vietnam, Watergate, and the collapse of the postwar Keynesian order led the new right, united behind Ronald Reagan's electoral victories in the 1980s, to use Central America as the place to work out the lineaments of neoconservative foreign policy: militarism and neoliberalism, powered by right-wing Christian populism and the vaulting language of American exceptionalism.

At the same time, it was also in Latin America that Washington began to dilute the ideal of

*Greg Grandin teaches history at NYU. He is the author of, among other works, Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism (Metropolitan Books, 2006). His new book, Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City, is forthcoming from Metropolitan Books.*

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sovereignty, paving the way for neocon unilateralism: The Contra War, Washington's refusal to recognize the jurisdiction of the World Court when it ordered the United States to pay reparations to Nicaragua, and the invasions of Grenada and Panama all served as important legal and diplomatic precedents to the invasion of Iraq.

Today, with the neocon coalition in tatters, calls are coming from the most respectable places for Washington to use "soft power" more effectively, to dial down the bombast, and to accommodate itself to a new, plural world. The Phoenix Initiative, for example, a group made up of foreign-policy mandarins associated with the Democratic Party, including some Obama advisers, identifies the Iraq war as an error not just in execution but in conception, and calls on Washington to pursue more cooperative, respectful relations with regional interests to confront an array of global threats, defined in decidedly non-ideological terms.<sup>1</sup>

And though the Phoenix Initiative only makes passing reference to Latin America, a number of influential think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as foreign-policy

intellectuals like Francis Fukuyama, have recently issued proposals for how to make the region the centerpiece of a redeemed diplomacy: Normalize relations with Cuba; implement meaningful immigration reform; ignore Hugo Chávez; increase developmental aid; and make concessions on domestic agricultural subsidies and tariffs in order to win back Brazil and jump-start the moribund Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA).

But left unstated in all these prescriptions is the overarching issue that will confront the new administration: how to respond to the failure of neoliberalism, not just as an economic policy but as a vehicle through which the United States has projected its influence. Advocates of the Washington Consensus had hoped that privatization and deregulation would create a new urban class of consumers benefiting from and invested in a newly opened global economy, natural allies in a U.S.-led post-Cold War world. But except in a few circumscribed locations, in Brazil, for example, or Santiago, Chile, and a few areas in Mexico and Colombia, this has not occurred.

Between 1980 and 2000, disastrously low economic growth rates and cascading financial crises eviscerated the middle class and national manufacturers, whittling down neoliberalism's base of support to a small transnational class (whose domestic power relies almost exclusively on monopoly control of finance and corporate media) and a group of evermore ideologically inflamed resource and agro-elites, of the kind on the march in Bolivia's Media Luna region. Such a besieged constituency is too slender a thread for Washington to hang a sustainable hemispheric policy on.

What to do? In 2002, in the wake of the Argentine financial meltdown—one of the worst economic collapses in recorded history—architects of the Washington Consensus, such as former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, backed Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's presidential bid, hoping that he would show what reform through market-led growth could achieve. Lula proved as cautious as expected, yet that didn't stop the decomposition of U.S. influence. Brazil's aspirations to regional hegemony have generally led Lula to support the left's broader foreign-policy agenda, especially as it relates to opposing the FTAA and the World Trade Organization and promoting regional political and economic integration.

And in the Andes, the kind of structural adjustment policies supported by Washington hastened the collapse of already tottering political and economic establishments, paving the way for emergent political coalitions grouped around Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. In response, Washington in

## Trade Justice New York

### About the campaign:

Trade Justice New York Metro is a grassroots coalition of organizations and individuals that is part of the national and hemisphere-wide Global Justice and Fair Trade movement to stop so-called free trade agreements like the Colombia–U.S. FTA and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. These agreements have been negotiated in secret by governments and multinational corporations. Our aim is to reclaim democratic control over this decision-making process by raising awareness, organizing concerned people, and showing elected leaders just how many people oppose these pro-corporate, anti-labor, anti-environment, anti-animal, anti-democratic agreements.

### For more information and to get involved:

e-mail: [leonard.morin@gmail.com](mailto:leonard.morin@gmail.com)  
[www.tradejustice.net](http://www.tradejustice.net)

recent years has backed a new model of nation building as a remedy to neoliberalism's inherent instability: the franchising of Plan Colombia to neighboring countries.

In 2004, the Council on Foreign Relations sharply criticized Plan Colombia as a catastrophe in the making.<sup>2</sup> As the centerpiece of Washington's broader "war on drugs," it has served to entrench paramilitary and corporate-mercenary power, foreclose the possibility of a negotiated, regionally brokered solution to the crisis, and inflamed a conflict that has already once spilled beyond national borders—in March of last year, when Colombian troops launched a raid into Ecuador. While it has not lessened narcotics exports to the United States, the drug war has spread the violence associated with drugs up through Central America and into Mexico. Much like the war in Iraq, Washington's militarization of the drug problem in Latin America has worsened what it sought to solve, thus providing an excuse for even more militarism.

But the Council on Foreign Relations (in its latest task force report on the region) now hails Plan Colombia as an unparalleled success—in establishing a state presence in "many regions previously controlled by illegal armed groups, reestablishing elected governments, building and rebuilding public infrastructure, and reaffirming the rule of law"—and recommends a similar solution for violence-plagued Mexico and Central America.<sup>3</sup> Under the auspices of such programs as the Merida Initiative, Plan Puebla-Panama, and the Security and Prosperity Partnership, the objective is to build a security corridor running from Mexico to Colombia. Call it top-down, transnational state formation, an attempt to integrate the region's intelligence agencies, militaries, and police (and, most likely, mercenary corporations like DynCorp) subordinated under the direction of the U.S. Southern Command. Thomas Shannon, Washington's assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, described it, in a moment of candor, as "armoring NAFTA."

As a candidate, Obama, referring to Bush's decision to invade Iraq, said he wasn't opposed to all wars, just stupid ones. Washington's "war on drugs" in Latin America is the stupidest war one can imagine. Yet it is probably too much to expect the new president to reject, or significantly reverse Plan Colombia. It is, after all, a legacy not of Bush's White House but of Clinton's, and important Democratic constituencies are heavily invested in keeping it going. Human rights analyst Robin Kirk says a better name for Plan Colombia would be Plan Connecticut, since it has enriched one of Senator Christopher Dodd's most important

corporate sponsors, United Technologies, along with other northeast defense contractors.

But there is hope that the Obama State Department might at least back away from the last administration's failed attempt to drive a wedge between the "good left" and "bad." Venezuela, after all, is not Iran: It wouldn't take anything more than an orchestrated gesture—say, a commitment from Caracas to cooperate in stemming drug traffic—for Obama to be able to claim a major ambassadorial victory. More than any other world region, Latin America, in fact, probably offers the incoming administration the best opportunity to put into place the tolerant dispensation called for by the Phoenix Initiative.

Despite its recent erosion of authority, the United States still enjoys considerable influence there; many Latin Americans would welcome a de-ideologized hemispheric policy, one that downplays terrorism, prioritizes poverty and inequality, and expresses a willingness to solve common problems in a mutual manner. The inevitable saber rattling in the Persian Gulf or Pakistan, undertaken to prove Obama's mettle, will make cooperative relations in Latin America that much more valuable as a showcase. And those countries most vilified by the outgoing Bush White House—particularly Venezuela and Bolivia—have influential allies among Obama's top advisers, including New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, Massachusetts representative Joseph P. Kennedy II, and perhaps even Indiana's Republican senator Dick Lugar, who had a cordial conversation with Morales during the Bolivian president's brief visit to Washington in November. Furthermore, any U.S. president who is sincere in wanting to help Latin Americans liberate themselves from "want" will have to work with the Latin American left—in all its varieties.

Whatever policy Washington chooses to pursue, progressives should be clear about one thing: For all the talk about reviving the Four Freedoms, the true measure of whether the new administration has broken with neocon diplomacy will be the degree to which it acknowledges the absolute sovereign right of individual nations to chart their own course in the realm of both politics and economics. With social-democratic nationalism ascendant in Latin America, and as a new foreign policy coalition grappling to work out its ideas takes power in Washington, Latin America once again seems poised to be the venue of a major realignment of diplomatic protocol. Let's hope it is for the better. ■

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### The *Minga* of Resistance

1. "An Open Letter From the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, ACIN, to U.S. President-Elect Barack Obama," Santander de Quilichao, Cauca, Colombia, November 10, 2008; available at [mama.radio.blogspot.com](http://mama.radio.blogspot.com).

### Beyond the Four Freedoms

1. See the group's self-published document, "Strategic Leadership: Framework for a 21st Century National Security Strategy," available at [cnas.org](http://cnas.org).
2. See "Andes 2020: A New Strategy for the Challenges of Colombia and the Region (A Center for Preventive Action Report)" (January 2004); available at [cfr.org](http://cfr.org).
3. Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S.–Latin America Relations: A New Direction for a New Reality," Independent Task Force Report no. 60, (May 2008): 27; available at [cfr.org](http://cfr.org).

### Treating Bolivia as a Sovereign Partner

1. Author interview, October 2008.
2. Shira Gordon, "Bolivia: Beyond the Rhetoric," *Columbia Political Review* 7, no. 1 (November 2007).
3. Roger Burbach, "The Rise of Food Fascism: Allied to Global Agribusiness, Agrarian Elite Fomenting Coup in Bolivia," *Global Alternatives News*, June 30, 2008, [globalalternatives.org/node/87](http://globalalternatives.org/node/87).
4. Tony Phillips, "The Bolivian Crisis, the OAS, and UNASUR," Americas Policy Program Discussion Paper, September 30, 2008, [americas.irc-online.org/am/5567](http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5567).
5. Laura Carlsen, "The Failure of U.S. 'Democracy Promotion' in Bolivia," Americas Policy Program column, October 31, 2008, [americas.irc-online.org/am/5638](http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5638).
6. The Andean Information Network, "Bolivian Coca Growers Cut Ties With USAID," June 27, 2008; available at [ain-bolivia.org](http://ain-bolivia.org).
7. *Ibid.* See also Kathryn Ledebur and Coletta A. Youngers, "ONDCP Reports No Increase in Coca Cultivation in Bolivia in 2006," May 23, 2007; available at [wola.org](http://wola.org).

### MALA: Framing Peace as Violence

1. The full report, titled "An Examination of May Day 2007 MacArthur Park," was issued in October 2007 and can be downloaded at [lapd.online.org/assets/pdf/final\\_report.pdf](http://lapd.online.org/assets/pdf/final_report.pdf).
2. We base our riot-suppression narrative on McLeod and Detenber's "protest paradigm." See Douglas McLeod and Benjamin H. Detenber, "Framing Effects of Television News Coverage of Social Protest," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 3 (1999): 3–23.
3. LAPD report, 9, 50.
4. See Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphoric Representations of Latinos in Contemporary Public Discourse* (University of Texas, 2002), chapters 2 and 3.
5. These latter figures do not add up to the overall totals since we do not refer to so-called minor metaphors (which rarely occur) and metaphors that are neither violent nor peaceful.
6. *KCAL 9 News* at 4 p.m. and *KCBS 2 News* at 5, both on May 2.
7. As in: "The president of the Los Angeles Police Protective League released this statement earlier today. Allow me to quote it here. 'The clash at MacArthur Park started when officers tried to disperse demonstrators that moved off the sidewalk into the street threw rocks and bottles at officers.' They go to say: 'The officers gave a legal dispersal order. That is important. Our officer gave a legal dispersal order and were met with the violence. In coming days, it will become clear what transpired. Until then there should be no rush to judgment.'" *KNBC Channel 4 News* at 5 p.m. *KTTV-FOX Ten O'Clock News* aired a similar report.
8. Hillel Nosssek, Annabelle Sreberny, and Prasun Sonwalkar, "Introduction," in *Media and Political Violence* (Hampton Press, 2007), 1–22.
9. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

(continued from page 2)

Bush is simply implementing that program on the ground.

What is disturbing about Lovato's misstatement of my work is that he uses it to dismiss the idea that the raids advance any political program beyond the growth of the enforcement bureaucracy itself. He never mentions the bills. This gives a free pass to the backers of the corporate reform of immigration policy, and drops out any connection to displacement caused by trade and economic policies abroad. Lovato argues that the sole economic motivation of enforcement is giving fat contracts to administration cronies like Halliburton. That's like saying the Iraq war was fought to profit Halliburton. There's more to the war than that, and there's more to immigration enforcement than contracts and the growth of a repressive bureaucracy.

For three years progressive immigrant rights activists have fought proposals in Congress that would eliminate those changes in immigration policy that were won in 1964–5 by the Chicano civil rights movement—establishing family reunification as the centerpiece for immigration policy, ending the *bracero* program, and moving away from contract labor. Those who have advocated the corporate "comprehensive" bills have claimed that legalization for the undocumented was possible only if we agreed to move backward, transforming immigration policy into a much more overt labor-supply system. To justify this, these advocates (including many Democrats) claim employers face vast labor shortages if they don't get the labor they want at a price they want to pay.

Progressive immigrant-rights organizations and most of the labor movement today advocate alternatives that focus on ending employer sanctions, raids, and the criminalization of work and migration; guaranteeing real legal status (permanent residence visas) for the undocumented; expanding ways for people to come to the United States with rights (not as guest workers); and rejecting free trade treaties and structural adjustment policies that displace people and force them to leave home. Migration is a human right, but people should have alternatives for economic development that make migration voluntary, and not the sole means of survival.

We are already seeing the resurrection of the corporate "comprehensive reform" proposals. It is not enough to criticize the repression of the raids while ignoring the broad program they are intended to advance, or alternatives to it.

**David Bacon**  
Berkeley, California

**Editor Pablo Morales replies:** The sentence that Bacon quotes from Lovato's article does indeed misstate Bacon's view, as expressed in the *Dollars & Sense* article that Lovato cited ("The Real Political Purpose of the ICE Raids," January/February 2007). This was wholly my own editing blunder, not Lovato's. The sentence should have read: "David Bacon posits that the crackdown is purposefully meant to trigger a political crisis that will pressure Congress to approve the migration policy the government has been pushing for all along: a temporary guest-worker program." Despite the regrettable error, the disagreement between Lovato and Bacon—on how to interpret the immigrant deportation raids—stands. Lovato will reply in the next issue.