

# Open Letter to Senator Barack Obama From A Group of Scholars Specializing in Latin America

October 20, 2008

## ***Dear Senator Obama:***

We write to offer our congratulations on your campaign and to express our hope that as the next president of the United States you will take advantage of an historic opportunity to improve relations with Latin America. As scholars of the region, we also wish to convey our analysis regarding the process of change now underway in Latin America.

Just as the people of the United States have begun to debate basic questions regarding the sort of society they want-- thanks in part to your own candidacy but also owing to the magnitude of the current financial crisis-- so too have the people of Latin America. In fact, the debate about a just and fair society has been going on in Latin America for more than a decade, and the majority are opting, like you and so many of us in the United States, for hope and change. As academics personally and professionally committed to development and democracy in Latin America, we are hopeful that during your presidency the United States can become a partner rather than an adversary to the positive changes already under way in the hemisphere.

The current impetus for change in Latin America is a rejection of the model of economic growth that has been imposed in most countries since the early 1980s, a model that has concentrated wealth, relied unsuccessfully on unrestricted market forces to solve deep social problems and undermined human welfare. The current rejection of this model is broad-based and democratic. In fact, contemporary movements for change in Latin America reveal significantly increased participation by workers and peasants, women, Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples-- in a word, the grassroots. Such movements are coming to power in country after country. They are neither puppets, nor blinded by fanaticism and ideology, as caricatured by some mainstream pundits. To the contrary, these movements deserve our respect, friendship and support.

Latin Americans have often viewed the United States not as a friend but as an oppressor, the guarantor of an international economic system that works against them, rather than for them-- the very antithesis of hope and change. The Bush Administration has made matters much worse, and U.S. prestige in the region is now at a historic low. Washington's tendency to fight against hope and change has been especially prominent in recent U.S. responses to the democratically elected governments of Venezuela and Bolivia. While anti-American feelings run deep, history demonstrates that these feelings can change. In the 1930s, after two decades of conflict with the region, the United States swore off intervention and adopted a Good Neighbor Policy. Not coincidentally, it was the most harmonious time in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. In the 1940s, nearly every country in the region became our ally in World War Two. It can happen again.

There are many other challenges, too. Colombia, the main focus of the Bush Administration's policy, is currently the scene of the second largest humanitarian crisis in the world, with four million internally displaced people. Its government, which criminalizes even peaceful protest, seeks an extension of the free trade policies that much of the hemisphere is already reacting against. Cuba has begun a process of transition that should be supported in positive ways, such as through the dialogue you advocate. Mexicans and Central Americans migrate by the tens of thousands to seek work in the United States, where their labor power is much needed but their presence is denigrated by a public that has, since the development of opinion polling in the 1930s, always opposed immigration from anywhere. The

way to manage immigration is not by building a giant wall, but rather, the United States should support more equitable economic development in Mexico and Central America and, indeed, throughout the region. In addition, the U.S. must reconsider drug control policies that have simply not worked and have been part of the problem of political violence, especially in Mexico, Colombia and Peru. And the U.S. must renew its active support for human rights throughout the region. Unfortunately, in the eyes of many Latin Americans, the United States has come to stand for the support of inequitable regimes.

Finally, we implore you to commit your administration to the firm support of constitutional rights, including academic and intellectual freedom. Most of us are members of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the largest professional association of experts on the region, and we have experienced first-hand how the Bush administration's attempt to restrict academic exchange with Cuba is counter-productive and self-defeating. We hope for an early opportunity to discuss this and other issues regarding Latin America with your administration.

Our hope is that you will embrace the opportunity to inaugurate a new period of hemispheric understanding and collaboration for the common welfare. We ask for change and not only in the United States.

Sincerely,

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