

Miami Herald article

Posted on Sun, Jun. 01, 2003

U.S. ATTENTION TO LATIN AMERICA SINKS TO NEW LOWS

WASHINGTON - Over the years, I've heard dozens of amazing anecdotes about the U.S. government's lack of attention to Latin America. But the story I've just heard about an ill-fated effort to get Congress interested in the region ranks among the best.

It turns out that the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank, recently invited the 535 members of Congress to a hemispheric conference on inter-American affairs in Brazil May 23-26.

Organizers were hopeful that many congressmen would attend. After all, Brazil is the biggest country in the region, and its 5-month-old leftist government is currently representing all other Latin American nations in talks with the U.S. government to create a Free Trade Area of the Americas by 2005.

As if that were not enough, Brazil is also a country of beautiful beaches, where stunning young men and women are known to wear some of the skimpiest bathing suits in the world. Not a bad place to spend the Memorial Day weekend, you would think.

But of the 535 members of Congress, only one -- Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz. -- ended up going. Seven others canceled at the last minute after learning that they had to fly on a commercial plane.

"Latin America is not an area of great interest at this moment," says Inter-American Dialogue President Peter Hakim, putting it politely.

``You can see it in the administration, in Congress, in the business community, in the press."

Indeed, on Jan. 1, when Brazil's leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, took office, only four of 30 major U.S. newspapers carried the story on their front page. (The Herald carried the story on Page One, but neither The New York Times nor The Washington Post did.)

Last Sunday, the day President Néstor Kirchner took office in Argentina, none of the top 25 U.S. dailies carried the story on its front page, and only three ran the story inside. Granted, this is nothing new. As the late New York Times columnist James Reston used to say, ``The American people will do anything for Latin America, except read about it.''

Why is the United States so inattentive to a region that is already buying more U.S. goods than the European Union and could become an even bigger market with a hemispheric free trade deal?

The standard response by Washington insiders is that the U.S. government has always been crisis-driven: Tell me where there is a crisis, and I'll tell you where the U.S. government's attention is and where the media will look.

CRISIS OF THE DAY

Even in this hemisphere, the White House is focused on the crises of the day. Richard Feinberg, a former head of the Clinton White House office of hemispheric affairs, once told me with a resigned smile that he had two officers reporting to him: One was dedicated full time to Haiti, and the other to the rest of the hemisphere. (Yes, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina included.)

Today, the White House National Security Council office has five officials, each dealing with a different sub-region. But at the State Department, the Cuba desk has nine officers, while the Brazil desk has only two, U.S. officials say.

Is the U.S. government ever going to pay attention to Latin America?

Bush administration officials say U.S. government interest in the region has grown in recent years, and to some extent they are right.

They concede that it was derailed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but add that it will be restored in the coming weeks with Friday's signing in Miami of the U.S.-Chile free trade agreement, the planned visits of Lula and Kirchner to Washington and Bush's presence at a special hemispheric summit in Mexico at the end of the year. These

events require a lot of preparation, which will require high-level attention, senior U.S. officials told me.

Maybe so. More importantly, though, the explosive growth of the U.S. Hispanic population will force the U.S. government to look south.

HISPANIC VOTERS

Consider: In a country whose last election was decided by less than 1 percent of the vote, Hispanic voters have soared from 2 percent of the overall voting population in 1988 to 7 percent in 2000, and are projected to become 14 percent of the electorate by 2010.

What's even more significant, the 20 percent of 1988 Hispanic voters who were born in Latin America soared to 48 percent in 2000, and will skyrocket to 65 percent by 2010, according to Bendixen and Associates projections. And President Bush may need nearly 40 percent of the Hispanic vote to be re-elected, pollsters say.

The future of U.S.-Latin American relations, indeed, looks extraordinary. But the present is depressing.