

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Democrat to play role in U.S.-Latin American ties

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Over the past six years, U.S. policy toward Latin America -- if there was one -- has been pretty much run by President Bush's buddies. Come January, there will be a new powerful player in the game: likely head of the Senate's Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn.

Dodd, a fluent Spanish-speaker, has been one of the most active members of the Senate on Latin American issues for the past 25 years. He was a leading voice of support for the Central American peace plan of the 1980s, a vocal opponent of the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba, and most recently a foe of free-trade agreements with Chile and Central America.

In January, in addition to leading the powerful Senate Banking Committee, he will most likely head the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee. And what may give him a higher-than-usual profile in his new jobs: He will probably announce his presidential candidacy very soon.

"I am considering it very, very seriously," Dodd told me about his presidential aspirations during a 30-minute telephone interview Friday. "I'm closer to making that decision than not."

What would be his priorities as head of the Senate subcommittee that handles Latin American affairs, I asked. Dodd said he plans to hold "high profile hearings" on key issues such as overall U.S. ties to the region, Mexico, Cuba, and the U.S. counternarcotics policy in Colombia.

"Today, the United States is being held in very low regard in the hemisphere -- If I had to pick a word to describe the way they see us, it's 'disappointment,'" Dodd said. "But it's not in such a bad shape that it can't be repaired."

COLLABORATION

Dodd said he will be able to work closely with State Department Latin American affairs chief Thomas Shannon, whom he praised as somebody who "understands the region." Shannon's predecessors used to see "everything through very ideological lenses," he said.

Dodd's specific plans:

- On Mexico: ``It's a very troubled year for Mexico, and we are standing by as spectators. We should be more vocal in our support for President Felipe Calderón. He has been elected President of Mexico."
- On Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and other leftist leaders: ``We have to engage with some of these center-left presidents, whether it's [Rafael] Correa in Ecuador, [Evo] Morales in Bolivia, [Néstor] Kirchner in Argentina, or [Daniel] Ortega in Nicaragua. They are democratically elected governments. The Bush administration says it loves democracy, but you can't love democracy and hate its results."

But Dodd took distance from Chávez: ``He has to smarten up. He is a very important guy in the hemisphere, but his language has to change. He says he wants the United States to play a better role, but it seems he is saying that and wanting it not to happen."

- On free trade, Dodd said he considers himself "a free trader and a fair trader." He voted for free trade with Mexico in 1993, but against most recent treaties with Latin American countries, citing concerns over lack of labor provisions. Asked about free-trade deals with Peru and Colombia, he said that ``if they don't change the labor provisions, I will not support them."
- On U.S. counternarcotics policy: ``The price of drugs is cheaper today, and the purity is higher than it has ever been. I want an assessment on how things are going."
- On Cuba: ``We are entering a transition period in Cuba, and we are on the sidelines because of the Helms-Burton legislation, which bars any meaningful contacts with the Cuban government unless you have a Jeffersonian democracy in Cuba. If they had that language in Eastern Europe, we would still have Communist governments there."

MIXED BAG

My opinion: I like Dodd's long-term focus on Latin American affairs, his stand on Mexico, and his skepticism about Chávez. On the other hand, I don't like his current stand on free trade (he's caving in to the protectionist wing of the Democratic Party) and I'm not crazy about his Cuba policy (he's right in

opposing the U.S. travel ban and some Helms-Burton demands, but comes across as too soft on Cuba's dictatorship.)

But Dodd will be a commanding figure in U.S.-Latin American affairs from his new Senate jobs. And, you never know, maybe from someplace higher up in 2008.