

'Bush has picked right priority for U.S. action'

The Miami Herald

Jul. 17, 2007

President Bush wants to make the United States relevant again in Latin America. Last week, he hosted a White House Conference on "Advancing Social Justice in the Americas" to highlight a shift in U.S. policy priorities in Latin America.

For the past six years, Washington's limited attention to Latin America has concentrated on free trade, narcotics trafficking and security threats. The president now wants the United States to help its hemispheric neighbors tackle their long-neglected social agendas -- the pervasive poverty, inequality and race discrimination that deprives so many Latin Americans of economic opportunity and basic rights.

Bush has picked the right priority for U.S. action. Some 40 percent of Latin Americans live in poverty, a figure that has not changed much in a quarter century. No other region of world has a more unequal distribution of income. But the president has not begun to match the thought, energy or resources that President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela is investing in the social agenda. The administration's proposals so far -- visits by a U.S. hospital ship, increased scholarships, new lending to small enterprises -- are woefully short of well-considered strategy. And the White House's social-justice conclave was designed to showcase the generosity of private groups -- not to set a new U.S. policy course. No wonder most Latin Americans remain skeptical.

Bush should start with a hard look at existing U.S. polic

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