

# Merida Initiative a Welcome Distraction

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WASHINGTON -- As one who has written about the desert that often is U.S. policy toward Latin America, I should be quick to admit that it is also easy to see mirages.

But Washington's \$1.4 billion multiyear Merida Initiative for Mexico and Central America -- intended to "break the power and impunity of drug and criminal organizations that threaten the health and public safety" in the region -- is very real. Currently winding its way through Congress, the initiative, which provides military hardware and training for drug interdiction and border security, could become one of the most significant developments in President Bush's policy toward his southern neighbors.

The Merida Initiative, which takes its name from the Mexican city where North American leaders met earlier this year, certainly isn't perfect. Democrats have criticized the administration for failing to consult Congress as the plan was being crafted. My complaint is that the current request includes only \$50 million to be shared among seven Central American countries, a tenth of what Mexico would get. Initially, according to a congressional source, the calculation was that \$400 million would be necessary to shore up Central American security from the start. As Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) warned during a congressional hearing on the initiative last month, Mexico's gain could be Central America's loss.

Still, the initiative is a significant step forward in regional affairs. For years, disagreements centering on the definition of security stalled cooperation -- the U.S. emphasis on fighting terrorism clashed with Latin Americans' insistence that security threats were more defined by growing unemployment, extreme poverty and lingering discontent.

But with the Merida Initiative, officials on both sides of the border now agree on sharing technical resources, information and training, and the United States can be more confident about diffusing even potential terrorist threats while Latin Americans can promote the stability they believe is necessary for increased prosperity. As the joint statement upon the initiative's launch indicated, this multilateral effort will be guided "by principles of mutual trust, shared responsibility and reciprocity."

Perhaps this too will turn out to be a mirage. But for now this language of cooperation is a welcome apparition amid the ugly political rhetoric in the United States that is getting all the media attention -- the immigration debate.

Of course it is a little naive to lament that politicians will be politicians. But still, it doesn't make it any less frustrating when candidates of both parties simplify the issue to the point where it's essentially devoid of any solution except a punitive one. Moreover as candidates get hung up on whether to issue driver's licenses to illegal immigrants or how high to build a fence along the U.S. border with Mexico, they perpetuate the myth that immigration has a unilateral solution.

And even when candidates such as former Gov. Mike Huckabee (R-Ark.) or Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) show any signs of humanity on immigration, the effort to bash them back into line is overwhelming. That is just another sign of the Tancredoization of the issue. Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), who in the Republican debate last week celebrated how his fellow candidates want to "out-Tancredo Tancredo," is an anti-immigration zealot who seemingly has made it his life's mission to rid this country of those illegal immigrants who, he charges, are changing the nature of this country and have already turned a city such as Miami into a "Third World" nation.

It is hard to predict how lasting the damage created by this immigration hysteria will be. For now, it seems it may take years before this country can again return to discussing the need for a more comprehensive solution to its broken immigration system.

Meanwhile, there is at least the Merida plan to hang on to.

Certainly the initiative is not about immigration. But it is about the United States achieving its objectives in Latin America by finding common ground, rather than creating more contention.

Some years ago I wrongly bet that nothing like a Merida Initiative could emerge amid the current anti-immigrant environment. "The administration and Congress are under little pressure to deepen the U.S. commitment to Mexico by a public increasingly fearful and resentful toward immigrants, particularly Mexicans," I wrote.

My fear then, multiplied now by the ratcheting of the anti-immigration rhetoric, was that such discourse would only prolong illegal immigration by making people think the solution could be much simpler than it is -- that with enough barriers, Mexicans and other Latin Americans would go away. At least now there is one aspect in U.S. foreign policy -- the Merida Initiative -- that offers a surprising and comforting break away from all that.