

## **President can still forge a positive legacy in region**

President Bush is visiting Latin America at a difficult time for inter-American relations. Yet a page from President Clinton's playbook could help put the troubled partnership back on track. The key is for President Bush to show, in deed as well as word, a commitment to listen to and learn from our nation's hemispheric neighbors.

There is always pressure to keep a president's schedule marching along. Having worked in the Clinton White House, I have occasionally envied the Bush administration's corporate efficiency on this score. But in Latin America, President Bush should exhibit some Clinton-style curiosity: lingering in his conversations and encounters; putting aside scripted talking points in favor of candid exchange; getting out of his motorcade to savor the local culture; and investing the time to develop trusting relationships with Latin colleagues.

Actions like these can help erase perceptions of U.S. arrogance even as they offer both sides a more textured understanding and appreciation of one another. At the same, the administration must generate progress on issues that benefit all Americans, North and South. The president has been weakened domestically, but he still has the ability to restore a sense of hemispheric momentum and hope.

Here too, President Clinton's experience is instructive. After all, he too faced challenges to his vision for hemispheric cooperation, which had gotten off to a promising start with the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Miami Summit of the Americas. When these initial achievements were clouded by the Mexican peso's collapse, Clinton responded by leading the peso recovery package that, although politically unpopular in America, restored stability in Mexico and kept hemispheric partnership on solid footing.

Then, even though the Republican majority in Congress limited his room to maneuver, President Clinton remained engaged throughout his second term by appointing a special envoy to the Americas, a position I was proud to hold; taking six trips to 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries; and devoting his energies to issues on which he could forge bipartisan consensus, such as creating Plan Colombia and initiating free trade talks between the United States and Chile.

Likewise, President Bush should push for progress in three areas that will make a difference for Americans throughout the hemisphere:

- First, with the new Democratic majority in Congress, the time is ripe for meaningful immigration reform - anchored in human dignity, common sense and the rule of law.
- Second, the groundswell of U.S. public support for a sustainable energy policy has opened promising opportunities for ethanol collaboration with Brazil. Encouragingly, the administration has suggested this will be a priority issue for President Bush's meeting with Brazilian President Lula. By pooling ethanol innovations and resources and helping other hemispheric nations address their

- energy deficits, the United States and Brazil can build good will as partners with an antidote to oil dependency and poverty, and forge habits of cooperation that can be applied to issues like trade as well.
- Third, the president's trip should be the impetus for reaching a bipartisan deal on Trade Promotion Authority. The Bush administration must listen to Democrats who've been largely shut out of trade policy-making for the past six years. But Democrats, for their part, must not turn a deaf ear when the president says trade agreements are the centerpiece of our relations with Latin America.

Short-term renewal of TPA would enable the United States to conclude the Doha Round while clearing the way for votes on pending free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and Peru, and renewing American trade leadership in our hemisphere in the face of growing competition from China and India.

None of this will be easy, but it can all be achieved with sustained leadership from the top. And with longtime Latin experts John Negroponte and Tom Shannon in pivotal positions at the State Department, the administration is diplomatically well-placed.

It is not too late for President Bush to leave a positive legacy in U.S.-Latin American relations - turning a year of engagement into a future of collaboration.