

# LASA to President Bush:

## *Stop the Violation of our Academic Freedom!*

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) faces a crisis, provoked by the Bush Administration's policies of delay and denial in the granting of visas to Latin American scholars. LASA is the world's largest organization of Latin Americanist scholars, with a diverse, international membership of whom roughly 30 percent are Latin American. The success and viability of the LASA Congress, held every 18 months, depends on the full participation of our membership in an expansive atmosphere of interchange and debate. When Latin American scholars are denied visas, the integrity of the Congress is compromised, the core mission of LASA is undermined, and the academic freedom of every LASA member is violated.

In March 2003, the Bush Administration denied entry to 45 Cuban scholars for participation in the Dallas Congress; in September 2004, 60 Cuban scholars were denied visas to participate in the Las Vegas Congress; in early March 2006, we received notice of another blanket denial of 58 Cuban scholars, scheduled to travel to San Juan, Puerto Rico, for the March 2006 Congress. The stated rationale for these denials, that the scholars' presence would be "detrimental to the interests of the United States," is not credible. To the contrary, we strongly believe that U.S. national interests are served directly and substantively by precisely the kind of academic interchange that these scholars would provide.

The pattern of systematic visa denials began in the first Bush administration, and has been on a path of steady escalation since ever since. The most flagrant and massive case involves Cubans, but the problem reaches much further, to scholars from Bolivia, Nicaragua and Uruguay, among other countries. The deeply troubling conclusion that we draw from this pattern is that denials are based not on threats to our national security, but rather, retribution against governments and individuals that the Bush Administration opposes for political reasons. **The Treasury Department's current regulations impeding the travel of U.S. scholars to Cuba and the organization of courses there** further interfere with the free exchange of ideas central to LASA's mission. We insist that all such political considerations be disassociated from the basic principle of academic freedom.

In response to this crisis, the Executive Council of LASA has voted unanimously to make every effort to relocate the 2007 Congress, presently scheduled to take place in Boston, Massachusetts, to an alternative venue outside the United States. We intend for the substantial revenues that the LASA Congress brings to its chosen site to speak loudly, to amplify our message regarding the fundamental principle of academic freedom at stake in this matter. As long as the United States government's current visa policy with regard to our Latin American colleagues persists, we can no longer, in good conscience, hold our Congress inside the United States. ■