

## The Obama Initiative

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During 2008–2009 the editors of *Latin American Perspectives* (*LAP*) organized three journal issues in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution (Issues 164, 165, and 166 [Volume 36, 1–3], January, March, and May 2009). A collective position paper evolved through that lengthy process and served to introduce our project. It was during this period that Barack Obama became U.S. president after a two-year campaign and a landslide election. In late 2009 the editors decided to focus on the first two years of his presidency and, in particular, his administration's policies on Latin America.

Our purpose was to seek a means for expressing a positive and constructive position regarding present and future U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. A position paper evolved through five meetings of debate and discussion and through four drafts with the intent of carrying a position paper to the Latin American Studies Association meetings in Toronto (October 6–9, 2010). Our position paper (to be published in the July 2011 issue of *LAP*) served as a foundation for resolutions prepared for the 2010 Congress. As academics concerned about the role of the United States in Latin America, we wanted to present LASA members with an opportunity to express their views about U.S. policy in Latin America and to identify problems and suggest new policy directions with the hope of improving future relations between the United States and Latin America.

At LASA our Obama resolution was debated and improved through a *LAP* workshop attended by some thirty persons, who carefully reviewed it and made minor changes. Next, the position paper served as a departure point for a "Featured Panel" presided over by Ronald Chilcote and Sheryl Lutjens and attended by several hundred

participants, with papers and presentations by Greg Grandin, Rafael Hernández, and Miguel Tinker-Salas. The paper and resolutions were also the focus of a *LAP* editors' meeting in Toronto.

Thus, we took our endeavor seriously and opened our lengthy deliberations to the LASA membership. LASA President John Coatsworth cooperated with us, and the resolutions were presented with petitions signed by more than twice the number of required endorsers (thirty). The LASA Executive Council (EC) must approve the submission of a resolution to a vote of the membership. The resolution on Cuba submitted by the Cuba Section and the *LAP* Honduras resolution moved forward with minor changes, but our resolution on Obama's policy for Latin America was, according to one EC member, voted down on the grounds that it was "factually inaccurate, lengthy, and ideological." We wanted it to be accurate and constructive, and we would have been willing to revise it in a way that the executive committee could approve it and the membership could vote it up or down. The EC could have consulted us, but chose not to do so. We believe that a mail ballot would have resulted in a very large majority of LASA members supporting the resolution, as indeed they subsequently approved the Cuba and Honduras resolutions. After the LASA Congress we consulted past association presidents Arturo Arias, John Coatsworth, Carmen Diana Deere, Susan Eckstein, Marysa Navarro, and Helen Safa, and they supported sending the Obama resolution for a vote and agreed that the text should appear in the *LASA Forum*. We print the resolution below.

### *Resolution on the Obama Administration and Latin America*

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) is the largest professional association in the world for individuals and institutions engaged in the study of Latin America and the Caribbean. With over 6,000 members, 45 percent of whom reside outside the United States, LASA is the one Association that brings together experts on Latin America from all disciplines and diverse occupational endeavors, across the globe. For decades, LASA members have spoken in defense of democracy and human rights in the Western Hemisphere and in support of peaceful and respectful relations among states in the region.

Whereas: as a candidate, Barack Obama promised a new approach to Latin America that rejected unilateralism and recognized the importance of promoting social justice and reducing inequality; and

Whereas: in October 2008, leaders and members of LASA called on Senator Obama, if elected, to reject the U.S. role in imposing economic policies that concentrated wealth and undermined human welfare and to respond with friendship and respect to the movements of workers, peasants, women and indigenous communities for social change; and

Whereas: in April 2009 at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad, President Obama recognized that "Every one of our nations has a right to follow its own path" and expressed his intention to engage the rest of the hemisphere on the basis of "mutual respect and equality"; and

Whereas: although some positive steps have been taken, such as the limited expansion of travel to Cuba, these initiatives have been relatively minor and are

outweighed by policies that continue and even expand the undesirable policies of the past; and

Whereas: the embargo of Cuba has not been lifted and the U.S. is the only nation in the Americas opposed to readmitting Cuba to the Organization of American States; and

Whereas: the militarism of Plan Colombia and Plan Mérida, the militarization of drug policy, and the deployment of the Fourth Fleet have been reinforced with plans to add military bases in Latin America and to increasingly militarize the U.S.-Mexico border; and

Whereas: the Obama administration has continued the George W. Bush administration's divisive and counterproductive hostility toward progressive governments in Latin America, particularly toward Venezuela and Bolivia, but failed to defend democracy in Honduras, condoning the coup, and has deepened ties to Colombia with its appalling record of human rights abuses; and

Whereas: the Obama administration has failed to address the causes of undocumented immigration, including the role of U.S. trade and economic policies, and has disregarded the harmful consequences of deporting more undocumented immigrants than the Bush administration; now therefore let it be

Resolved:

1. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to reduce, rather than increase, the U.S. military presence in Latin America and to reverse the militarization of U.S. regional and border policies;

2. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to accept the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas'(UNASUR's) call to establish South America as a zone of peace;

3. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to normalize relations with Cuba, including actively working to bring about the total lifting of the embargo by Congress;

4. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to actively pursue friendly relations with Bolivia, including ending the ban on importing Bolivian textiles;

5. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to actively pursue friendly relations with Venezuela and to end U.S. support for groups or entities that seek to destabilize the Venezuelan government;

6. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to base U.S. policy toward Colombia on the reduction of human rights abuses and violence against the civilian population by the security and paramilitary forces;

7. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to formulate new trade and development policies and programs that increase the opportunities for Latin Americans to live a dignified life in their own countries and that incorporate greater freedom of movement of labor in conditions that respect the rights of immigrant workers;

8. The Latin American Studies Association urges President Obama to cease deportation of undocumented immigrants who have no criminal charges against them until such time as comprehensive immigration reform is enacted and to fully support enactment of

the DREAM act that facilitates higher education for young adults who arrived as undocumented children;

This resolution will be mailed to President Barack Obama, all members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

Presented to the Executive Council by seventy-two members of the Latin American Studies Association.

[*Professor Chilcote is managing editor of the bimonthly journal Latin American Perspectives*] ■