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***Latin America Policy in the Next Two Years:  
The Obama Administration and the New Congress***

David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies/Harvard University – and  
The Washington Office on Latin America

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FEATURED REMARKS

I want to thank the David Rockefeller Center for Latin America Studies and the Washington Office on Latin America for inviting me to participate in this forum today. It's always a pleasure to work with these two outstanding organizations.

I think the last time I was sitting at the same table with Geoff Thale and Bill LeoGrande, we were sharing a scotch together in San Salvador during the events commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Jesuit martyrs at the University of Central America – the UCA. I've long appreciated their fine work and insights into U.S. policy in Latin America and what's happening on the ground in Latin America, especially in Central America and Cuba.

I also want to thank Joseph Tulchin for volunteering to moderate this program – I hope Harvard pays its Visiting Fellows well.

Latin America is a region – a hemisphere – that I love. I've had the privilege for nearly 30 years to travel to many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as a congressional aide to former Boston Congressman, the late Joe Moakley; as a Member of Congress in my own right; and as an ordinary American citizen with my family on vacation. I've met with presidents and generals, campesinos and indigenous leaders, the wealthy elite and refugees and the internally displaced. I've met with priests, nuns and a few people I might characterize as sitting a bit too close to the devil. I've talked with the victims of landmines and with guerrilla leaders who laid the landmines. Human rights defenders, trade unionists, ranchers, businessmen, family members of people held hostage in the jungles, journalists, reporters, teachers, health care workers, academics and politicians. I've traveled along hostile borders and ridden horseback with my kids along beaches. One of my fondest memories is of Joe Moakley serenading the cooks at the UCA with Boston-Irish ballads, such as "If You're Irish, Come Into the Parlor" and "Redhead." I've been lucky enough to have made many friends throughout Latin America, and I probably have a few enemies, too.

I've lived through times when U.S. taxpayer dollars were funding murderous militaries. And I've seen those same tax dollars help campesinos rebuild their homes after devastating floods and earthquakes, sow a crop of soybeans, and provide school children with healthy,

nutritious meals. U.S. policy has always been a mixed bag in Latin America. Positive and negative; light and dark.

In the global arena, the Obama Administration has sometimes been visionary, as in its global health policy and its signature food security program, Feed the Future. But its policies towards Latin America are a mixed bag. Even so, I think current U.S. policy is better than it's been in over a decade, even if filled with frustrations and missteps. I think President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a very good start at the April 2009 Summit of the Americas. They set a new tone and they listened to their Latin American counterparts, something U.S. leaders rarely do. But the lack of action for over two years on improving relations with Cuba, the bungled negotiations over the Colombian bases agreement, and the many missteps in handling the coup in Honduras increased the skepticism among Latin America leaders and civil society that the Obama Administration had anything new to offer except for its rhetoric.

President Obama has an opportunity in his upcoming trip to Brazil, Chile and El Salvador to demonstrate that he does stand for a new relationship; for economic aid and investments that result in greater social equity; and for strengthening respect for human rights and democracy. The question is whether he will do so.

Right now, there is a real disconnect between U.S. priorities and the region. According to the Latino Barometer – and please, you don't want me to try and say that in Spanish – the top nine concerns of Latin American citizens are:

- 1) Crime and insecurity – 27% said this is “the most important” problem;
- 2) Unemployment and underemployment (19%);
- 3) Economic problems (12%);
- 4) Poverty (7%);
- 5) Corruption (3%);
- 6) Gang violence (3%);
- 7) Public health (3%);
- 8) The political situation/governance (3%); and
- 9) Education (3%).

What do you hear about most often in Washington?

- Terrorism;
- Drugs and other trafficking;
- Migrants and immigration – and not in the very best sense;
- The spread of Venezuelan-Cuban ideology; and
- Access to free trade markets and energy sources.

Somehow, President Obama and his Latin America team need to bridge that gap. They need to stop confusing causes with effects. They need to be paying as much attention to addressing the education and employment needs of young people before they fall into the hands of drug and criminal cartels – as they do on fighting the drug lords.

This is not rocket science. We know that high youth unemployment leads many young people to turn to organized crime for career opportunities. In Mexico, they talk about a new category of young people known as *los ni nis* or “neither nors” -- young people who aren’t in school and have no hope for a job. And it makes no difference if you’re looking at Ciudad Juarez, the poorest *comunas* of Medellín, or the slums of San Salvador. The story is the same.

In the same way that the 2000 RAND Study was ignored – which told us that every dollar spent in the United States on prevention and drug treatment programs in order to decrease demand would have *23 times the impact* of that same dollar spent in trying to prevent or stop the cultivation of drugs in supply-side countries like Colombia and Peru was ignored – we now appear to be ignoring not just the need, but the obvious benefits from, making greater investments in education, youth employment and food security. We ignore the call by many Latin American leaders to take a fresh look at our drug policies and the endless drug wars. Nearly \$7 billion into Plan Colombia, we still see the Andean region producing about the same amount of cocaine. How much more will go to fighting the drug wars in Mexico and Central America without at least an equal match – dollar for dollar – for education, jobs and other anti-poverty programs?

Regrettably, even if the Obama Administration gets the connection between root causes and effects, such a revelation couldn’t come at a worse time. The shaky economy, an uncertain future, budget deficits and debt create greater political space for isolationism and xenophobia. At a time when Central and South America could benefit greatly from a new infusion of development aid, the White House and Congress are trying to out-do each other in draconian cuts to the budget. Aid to Latin America has always been a low priority, and I suspect it will be heading for the chopping block.

The President’s FY 2012 budget is actually pretty good, for a change, on Latin America – focusing on economic and social development more than in the past. Although we will see an increase in security aid aimed at combating the growing influence of drug cartels in Central America, I believe, given what Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement William Brownfield was saying during his recent trip to the region. Regrettably, however, once again, the president’s budget cuts aid to Latin American refugees and internally displaced – among the top crises in the world. The Western Hemisphere took the greatest hit in the President’s FY 2012 budget request for refugees and migration. This is even *after* the devastating winter floods that left one million more Colombians homeless and millions more in countries like Brazil.

In the recent continuing resolution that passed the House two weeks ago, food security programs – including emergency humanitarian food aid – were cut by 40 – 50 percent. This is not only callous and reckless, but it directly undermines our own national security and economic interests around the world.

I’d like to think that this is just a one-time aberration, a madness brought about by taking a hard look at the very difficult state of the federal budget. But I’d just be fooling myself. What we are witnessing is something altogether new from the Congress – Congressional leaders and a new freshman class who are probably the most ideological and rigid of my lifetime. And within

the context of Latin America, they are not only out of touch with modern Latin America, they are mired in Cold War thinking and confrontational politics.

In fact, you might almost describe them as nostalgic for the Cold War. They want to fight the old battles, rather than focusing on new agendas that promote development and strengthen democracy. I expect to see more ideological battles over Cuba, Venezuela and Honduras. I expect military and security aid to the hemisphere to increase in the battle against narco-terrorism and the Castro-Chavez axis. And I expect development aid and other non-military aid to decrease.

At a time when we need engagement, we will see confrontation. It will be less about solutions and more about pointing fingers and laying blame.

I am worried. I am very concerned. The new Members of the House don't have a clue what is going on in Latin America, let alone what U.S. programs are doing or might be doing. The older Members now in charge, especially over Western Hemisphere policy, are extremists who need a "bad guy" and thrive on confrontation and vitriol. So, it will not only be hard to get the money needed for even the most basic development, it will be hard to have any type of reasoned debate.

If there is one place where the Republicans and the Obama Administration are likely to agree, it will be around the still controversial free trade agreements. For now, the president has signaled his intention to move forward in the coming weeks or months with the Korea agreement. I think he will see how that goes before he makes up his mind how to proceed with the Colombia debate.

So that's how I see it – cutbacks and confrontation in Congress; and an Administration whose priorities don't match the needs and the top concerns of the Latin American people.

Don't get me wrong – there are some very good, forward-thinking people in the Administration. These are people I greatly admire. But creative and innovative thoughts from the Administration don't mean much unless they're matched by funding from the Congress.

If I were calling all the shots, I would put the U.S. on the side of victims of violence, whether in Colombia or El Salvador or elsewhere. So many people have suffered from war, corrupt militaries, guerrilla insurgents, paramilitaries and weak governments. It is important – even if only symbolically – that we stand with them and the human rights defenders who risk their own lives in defense of their people.

Finally, we need to support the voices of intelligent, sustainable development, democracy and change. We need to listen – and listen carefully – to what people in the region want. We need to overcome our arrogance – this attitude that we know best – and get behind projects that truly reflect the desires of the community.

If we do this, if we join together, inside and outside government, I still believe we can make a difference.