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Las políticas de Kennedy para América Latina

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Looking back forty years, most historians, foreign policy experts, and world leaders congratulate John F. Kennedy on his leadership in international affairs. He set idealistic goals while using realistic measures to achieve them. He was daring in his objectives but cautious in his means or execution. He honored the traditions of the past but wanted new policies oriented towards the future. Emphasizing his relations with Europe, the Cold War, the tension with Russia, the emerging problems in the Indo-China relationship, many experts do not appreciate the prominence that Latin America played in Kennedy's foreign policy and the attention to which he paid this continent in his 1960 campaign for the presidency, in his specific message for Latin America, in his inaugural address, and the priority that he gave it during his three years of presidency. He called it the most critical area in the world.

If the experts did not know it, Latin America knew it. For years they have been telling me how they stayed up all night the night that Kennedy was elected. The first elected president in the United States under the age of 44 and the first who was also a Roman Catholic. For years they have told me how they admired his conduct as a president and his unprecedented leadership in human rights for black and Hispanic Americans, his vow to land an American astronaut on the moon in the 1960's, and his fight to assure economic opportunity and justice to all Americans. They applauded his establishment of the Peace Corp which sent more volunteers to Latin America than to any other region in the world. They applauded his expansion of the Food for Peace program, which provided

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American agricultural surpluses to feed the hungry in Latin America and throughout the developing world. For years they have told me how they cried upon hearing the terrible news that he died.

It all began with his campaign for presidency in the 1960's and what he regarded as a stale and stagnant status quo in the policies and prospects in the United States. He believed it was time to get the country moving again and he felt that one of the main areas of stagnation was in Latin American policy. He felt the United States had failed to identify itself with the rising tide of freedom and change in Latin America to help the people of this continent achieve their economic aspirations and to demonstrate our concern with the problems of the ordinary citizens of this region. He talked about the continent's high infant mortality rate, high rate of illiteracy, lack of decent schools and homes and sanitation systems, the low gross national product in many countries and the population growth that exceeded economic growth in many countries. He believed that too often, the United States had accepted and rewarded dictators in Latin America by failing to align our policies with the forces of economic development, reform and social justice. He did not lump all Latin Americans together. He knew Argentina

was as different from many other countries on this continent, as it was and is different to the United States. He knew the same kinds of differences distinguished individual governments in other continents; Africa, Europe, Asia, but also that every continent faced region wide problems requiring region wide policies and region wide attention. He felt that Latin America was not getting that attention, whether on matters of economic development, student exchange or even voice of America information about our own country.

His views became clearer to his fellow countrymen and to the world on January 20th 1961 in his inaugural address. "To our sister republic, south of our border, we offer a special pledge to convert our good words into good deeds, and a new Alliance for Progress, to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty, for this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers, let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. Let every power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house". It was not about what the United States was going to do to or for Latin

America; it was about what we and our sister Republics were going to do together. It was what the United States was willing to join with other Latin American countries in doing. It was not the United States that was to be the master of this house; it was the Hemisphere that was to be the master of its own house with no hint of hegemony or assertion of unilateral US positions.

During the one thousand days of action and activity that followed, days of change, challenge and inspiration, sometimes frustration, two episodes involving Latin America stand out for their continuing impact today. One of these is not the Bay of Pigs, a flawed and failed attempt by the United States to sponsor and assist a band of Cuban exiles hoping to invade and recapture their country from communist rule. A well-intended but ultimately tragic episode from which the President learnt many valuable lessons. He later acknowledged this in Washington, accepting his own responsibility and mistakes. Many critics in Latin America and in the United States believe Kennedy was obsessed with Cuba and Castro and they felt it made his Latin American policy negative at the start. However, the Cuban military, Cuban subversion and attempts to assassinate leaders and radicalize the dispossessed in many parts of

Latin America did represent, in those days, a serious threat to the unity and stability of the Hemisphere, a threat that was recognized by the OAS. However it was Latin America's persistent, domestic, economic and social problems that represented a greater threat for Kennedy and he believed these would not be solved by complaining about Castro.

One of these outstanding episodes is not the Bay of Pigs, rather the occasion on which Kennedy best applied the lessons that he learnt from the Bay of Pigs. The lessons of analysis, organization, caution and preparation which were applied during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Everyone will remember their first thoughts upon hearing from the President of the United States that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, offensive weapons that were capable of reaching almost every part of both North and South America. These were the first nuclear weapons to be placed outside of the Soviet Union by the Soviets and the first to be placed by any power in the Western hemisphere. It posed the most serious threat of global destruction in history. It was a threat not only to Kennedy and his foreign policy but a threat to the entire world including Latin America. Kennedy did not

want a confrontation with Cuba, he made it very clear that he had no animosity towards the Cuban people or wished them any harm. However the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba could not be permitted. Kennedy had to decide upon a response which would not sour or harm his Latin American relations in the process. To bomb the missile sites without warning, like Pearl Harbor in reverse, could create new Castro's in parts of Latin America. It could generate mobs and anger in Latin America which could last for decades to come as well as Latin American suspicion of America's motives and missions. On the other hand, submitting passively to this unprecedented threat and sudden and surreptitious transfer of weapons of mass destruction into the hemisphere could convince many Latin Americans that the United States was not truly their protector, that the United States was unlikely to be the dominant power in the world in years to come, and that the United States lacked the will or courage to stand up against communist subversion in this hemisphere. As someone said "if we react too strongly the Latin Americans will turn against us, if we react too weakly they will turn away from us".

However Kennedy did not overreact or underreact. Instead he put together a careful

combination of deterrence and dialogue; a blockade or quarantine combined with the most severe warnings. Throughout his entire presentation, both on the night of October 22nd 1962 and thereafter, he emphasized that he was acting not simply for the defense of the United States but of the entire Hemisphere. It was a speech that was carried, in Spanish, throughout Latin America. He said that in the defense of American security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, he was vowing to regard any missile attack against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. His greatest satisfaction came the following day on October 23rd when the Organization of the American States, invoking the Rio treaty, unanimously authorized (unanimously with one abstention from one of the delegates who had not yet received the instructions from home) the naval blockade of Cuba as a legal, regional, defensive action. This, thereby, legitimized the quarantine in the eyes of international law, other nations, the United Nations, ship owners in the area from all over the world and their insurance companies and set back the Kremlin's hopes to assail the United States actions as an act of war.

Argentina not only voted to endorse and authorize the blockade but volunteered to send its own air and naval forces to assist the quarantine. Tragically, one of its planes crashed and a group of Argentinian military personnel lost their lives in that act for freedom. President Kennedy later said how very grateful he was for Argentina's participation and that it indicated a sense of solidarity which was very valuable to us for maintaining our position throughout the world. The success of the blockade made it unnecessary to proceed with alternative options such as bombing and invading Cuba, an action which would not have only revived fears of American military intervention in Latin America, but also as we now know from Soviet documents, it would have triggered a Soviet nuclear response using tactical weapons possessed by Soviet forces on the island of Cuba which would have almost certainly had guaranteed an American nuclear response, moving closer towards global destruction.

The other Latin American related highlight of Kennedy's foreign policy was a year and a half before the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was the launching of the Alliance for Progress on March 13th 1961 in the White House, addressed to the assembled ambassadors from Latin America, broadcasted in Spanish, Portuguese, French, and

English throughout the Hemisphere. It was a 10 point program calling for free governments, free trade, and free people in all the Americas and calling for greater economic development, immigration, widespread reforms, better administration, and new relationships. Some critics said that Kennedy's new program was still aimed at Castro and it certainly had an effect in a sense of advising the isolation of Cuba from the rest of the Hemisphere and the building of more stable democratic institutions in the rest of Latin America. It must be noted that The Marshall plan, the enormous aid program for the reconstruction of Western Europe after World War II, had been largely sold to the Congress by invoking the fears of Communist subversion and aggression in Western Europe. There were other critics of the Alliance for Progress both in the United States and in Latin America. Some were highly skeptical, claiming it was nothing more than a speech. However, in the Alliance for Progress, Kennedy delivered much more than a speech. He delivered action, economic development assistance, technical assistance and a new and continuing emphasis on human dignity and human rights and justice for all the people of Latin America. Moreover, the Alliance for

Progress emphasized not only help from the United States but self-help from the Latin Americans themselves. It emphasized their participation in decision making, their own initiative in undertaking reforms as well relief and their own efforts to end injustice and poverty. Far from shielding Latin America from the revolutionary storms stirred by Castro and communism, Kennedy challenge the continent to become what he called a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts and slowly Latin America began to respond to that challenge. There was, of course, resistance from those Latin American elites who had no wish to see land or tax reform or electoral reform diminished their special privileges and there were sit backs when newly responsive governments responded too easily to inflationary pressures and requests for extravagant expenditures sought by some voters. The sheer size of the problem was more formidable than even Kennedy had realized and staggered both him and his collaborators; however they only became more determined rather than discouraged.

In the end, the Alliance for Progress was an imperfect program and still incomplete at Kennedy's death and the program did not survive long. However, even in that short time, some of the economic and political signation

and disarray that had been so widespread at the time of Kennedy's campaign began to lift. There was more food, more textbooks for school children, more land for farmers, more homes for the poor, and there were better and more responsive and organized democratic governments to plan and manage these programs. Throughout Latin America that progress, with setbacks here and there, has progressed and largely continued in those last 38 years since Kennedy's death, particularly on the economic front. The regional economic integration of which JFK then spoke of, promising larger markets and greater competitive opportunity, has become a reality with the success of MERCOSUR and now the potential expansion of NAFTA into the Hemisphere wide free trade area, the Americas, and a system of region to region trade preferences with the European Union also lies ahead.

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