

Barrels, Borders and Bravery

By Derek Sambrook, FIBSA, TEP
Managing Director, Trust Services, S.A.,
Panama



A report in May from the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations prepared under the joint chairmanship of Charlene Barshefsky, the former United States of America trade representative, and General James T. Hill, the former commander of the US Southern Command, called for a radical change in the US policy towards Latin America. It said that the US had to shift its main priorities from free trade control, illegal drugs and the buttressing of democracy. All three remain important but the report said that today the focus should be more on immigration reform and building closer relations with the region's energy producers. It was argued that the US should accept that it is no longer the major player in a region where trade and investment links with Europe and Asia are growing.

Concentrating US minds on energy and immigration would benefit all concerned. Despite the fractious relations with Venezuela (the region's biggest oil producer), the US currently obtains some 30% of its oil from Latin America; significant new oil reserves have been found in Brazil so this could push the figure higher. Currently, it is said that the new reserves, which lie beneath a thick layer of salt that is approximately 800 km long and 200 km wide, are immense. Petrobras, the country's partly state-owned oil firm, believes that the anticipated billions of barrels of oil could place Brazil alongside suppliers such as Venezuela and Saudi Arabia.

As for immigration, the report went on to say that demographics and the growing labour needs of the US require changes in policy. A more fixed legal framework is especially needed for migrant workers, including temporary ones, because the trade, investment and social ties with Latin America will be as permanent as the Grand

Canyon; let's hope that the prickly issues separating the parties will not remain just as wide as it.

Perhaps one of the more controversial parts of the report, however, referred to the Cuban embargo and its eventual lifting. When the US president gazes south he sees a pair of twins in tyranny: Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Fidel Castro of Cuba; even although the latter may no longer be a president, his influence still hangs heavy upon the shoulders of his brother and successor, Raúl. If the former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, thought that a week is a long time in politics, remember that Fidel Castro was in power for 49 years.

In contemplation of the dictator's passing, I quoted H. G. Wells in this column (September 2006 – Issue 169 "Uncertain Times") who believed that the ashes of such men "should not choke the fire they have lit". Although the former guerrilla, who wrested power from the US-backed military regime of Fulgencio Batista, is now perhaps no more than a cinder, he still has the capacity to raise the political – if not the room – temperature in the White House. Remember, he is still head of the island's ruling Communist Party.

It was George Bernard Shaw who said that "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man". This holds true only if the unreasonable man has something better to offer, such as Mario Chanes de Armas did who died last year.

Once a close friend and ally of Fidel Castro, both had been together on 2 December 1956, when they reached a mangrove swamp on the south-east coast of Cuba in the Granma, a 60-foot wooden yacht, with just a few weapons, no water and Batista's troops about to attack. But both men were able to flee to the Sierra Maestra and the safety of the forests before

eventually returning in triumph to Havana after Batista fled. A few years earlier, both comrades had been imprisoned together on the Isle of Pines following a bold, but futile, attempt to storm Cuba's Moncada barracks in stolen soldiers' uniforms. The 10-year sentence imposed by the court was cut short (22 months) following an amnesty.

Mr. Chanes de Armas had been in awe of Castro, spellbound by the young lawyer's gift with words when he spoke passionately of liberty and democracy. Like President Bush, he wished for Cuba to have a proper democratic constitution with free elections, but everything seemed to change once Batista was ousted in January 1959.

His friend now seemed to him to be a megalomaniac and a committed communist. In 1961 he found himself again in prison on the Isle of Pines, charged with counter-revolutionary crimes by Castro. This time there was no amnesty and he remained in prison just one day short of 30 years. He was in prison longer than Nelson Mandela had been and when his only son died at the age of 24, he was not released to attend the funeral.

Eventually (and quietly) he moved to Miami after his release and shunned all publicity, avoiding contact with the vociferous Cuban exiles. Before leaving Cuba, and with the intercession of the government of Chile, he had placed flowers on his son's grave. It was said that he felt no hatred and thought that only cowards were vengeful, sentiments that Nelson Mandela can identify with. In a world where prejudice can eclipse priorities, will a future US president be brave enough to try another approach with Havana?

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