

Global Good Neighbor: Developing a New U.S. Latin America Policy

By Laura Carlsen | March 16, 2006

The following is the text version of a presentation by IRC Americas Program Director Laura Carlsen to the plenary of the Latin America track of Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington DC, March 11, 2006.

Thank you for the invitation to be here today with you all. I'm excited to see so many people gathered under a common theme as important as "Challenging Disparity," in a world that is increasingly and alarmingly unequal.

I've been asked to speak on the Global Good Neighbor initiative and in particular on how the concept of being a good neighbor can inform U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. I think a good place to begin is to tell you a little about the history of this initiative. The idea of thinking about a new framework for foreign policy began when a group of us associated with the International Relations Center began a series of discussions about a year ago on changing U.S. foreign policy and our nation's role in the world.

These talks were born of a deep concern over the course of U.S. foreign policy. Many of us had been working for many years in solidarity movements and on foreign policy issues in different parts of the world and although we had seen periods in which there was overt intervention and policies that led to widespread violence and bloodshed, such as the dirty wars in Central America, we had not seen a time when the U.S. government so openly defended unilateral action, military force as a basis for leadership, and narrowly defined U.S. economic and security interests as the sole organizing principle for international relations.

We were not only concerned about the many ways in which this new doctrine could put other peoples in the world at risk, but also about how it went against so many deeply held values of the U.S. people and actually put our own communities here at greater risk as well. I think in this room many of us hold the conviction that security is built on creating strong communities based on shared values rather than a fortress mentality that only emphasizes the kinds of disparities we are here to challenge today.

At the same time we knew there was reason to believe in the possibility of change. A large percentage of the U.S. population was becoming more and more actively involved in thinking about the U.S. role in the world and

opposed to the way the government defined it. From this perception of the state of things, three main challenges emerged.

1. How do we avoid a fragmentation of the movement?

That is, a defensive response where people working in different movements and issues dig in to defend advocacy work on disparate issues. Individuals working on Colombia expected an even stronger military orientation to U.S. policy in that country, those working against the Cuban embargo faced a tightening of measures to isolate Cuba, and people working on the border were seeing a security focus that further endangered the lives of immigrants and the quality of life there. And yet as pressing as all of these issues were and are, the problem was that if everyone retreated into separate issues we would lose the opportunity to form coalitions for broader change and end up trying to put out fires around the world—and doing it considerably less efficiently than the militarists' capacity to ignite them.

2. How do we build a positive and comprehensive framework for a new U.S. foreign policy? Especially when we look at Latin America, many terrible things have been done in our name by the U.S. government and so it's no surprise that we have so often found ourselves in opposition.

But there comes a time when you can't just be the perpetual naysayers, always on the margins of decision-making. We also know there are things we are *for*, that there's a need to move forward, and we realized that now—precisely at a time when there are so many things we are *against*—we had to make a collective effort to articulate the values and ways of acting that we, along with so many U.S. citizens, believe in.

3. Finally, we noted that as the administration manipulated us to accept fear as the driving force for defining

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the U.S. role in the world, it was becoming harder for people to believe change was possible. It seemed very important then to find a **framework that had historic precedents to remind us that our nation could act differently** and radically change an interventionist and domineering policy, for a good neighbor role in the world.

The result was the Global Good Neighbor Ethic for International Relations. The name Good Neighbor has two purposes: first it recalls the Good Neighbor policy of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt government in the thirties, when policy shifted radically from a blatantly empire-building, military focus to a focus on reciprocal relationships, reduced military presence, and links with new socially-oriented domestic policies. Second, it reminds us of what we value in relationships with neighbors—cooperation, communication, mutual respect.

Before we go through the basic principles it's as important to understand what a Global Good Neighbor Ethic is NOT as what it is. It is not a blueprint for foreign policy. This is a value-based guide to developing policies and actions in many different areas and depends on groups of concerned citizens throughout the country to flesh out what resulting policies and actions would look like. Hopefully this set of simple principles can help make the often complex and inaccessible field of foreign policy accessible to the average citizen.

The seven basic principles of the Global Good Neighbor Ethic follow:

The first is based on mutual respect and states simply that **the first step to being a good neighbor is to stop being a bad neighbor**. Perhaps nowhere do we find as many examples of bad neighbor behavior as in Latin America. From the Central American dirty wars, to active support for military dictatorships and overt intervention, the region has suffered more than its share of bad neighbor policies.

A respect for self-determination and ceasing all programs that seek to meddle in the internal affairs of other nations—including Condoleezza Rice's so called "transformational diplomacy" that includes National Endowment for Democracy and USAID programs to destabilize governments like Aristide in Haiti and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela is a necessary prerequisite for neighborly relations. Today the wall proposed for the southern border and our immigration policies in general demonstrate a direct and tragic example of being a bad neighbor. Not only do these policies result in more deaths on the border, they have also sparked animosity toward the United States in Mexico and other southern countries, while doing virtually nothing to

resolve the huge problems arising from our contradictory immigration policies.

The second principle links **changes in foreign policy to changes in domestic policy so that both serve the interests of the U.S. citizenry—not just the powerful elite**—and reflect consistency in values of: security based on cooperation, quality of life, and defense of human and social rights for all people. These are interests that we share with our neighbors and that build a stronger community, whether local or international.

The third states that **our interests are interconnected today more than ever to those of other nations** and therefore foreign policy must build on reciprocity rather than domination, mutual well-being over competition and cooperation rather than confrontation.

Fourth regards **the proper use of U.S. power, both military and economic, in being a global leader and partner** instead of pursuing its current agenda of dominance and hegemony.

Fifth states the need for a **security policy that assures preparedness and emphasizes non-military civil measures, multilateral forums, and international cooperation**.

Sixth supports **sustainable development at home and abroad**, through economic, trade, investment, and aid policies. The Free Trade Agreements—the North American version NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, the Chilean, Central American, and Andean agreements—fail to pass this principle by encouraging maximum short term profits rather than socially and environmentally sustainable development, and putting corporate privileges over public interests in vital areas such as health, environment, and labor rights.

Finally, principle seven calls for **effective governance at all levels that is accountable, transparent, and representative**.

Latin America

Since the first good neighbor policy in the thirties, Latin America has been a natural region for applying a new neighborly approach to international relations. Not only is it geographically near to us, with many aspects of shared history, but it's a region that faces profound problems of poverty, inequality, and strife, where the United States has been heavily involved, often negatively. What the United States does has a big effect on Latin America.

But if traditionally we've looked to solve problems in the region, today an equally remarkable development in Latin America is that many nations are taking global initiative in creating alternative models. As alternatives emerge, from participatory budgets to autonomous local governments, other developing countries are looking to Latin America as a continent of hope.

Today we see strong indigenous rights movements that not only claim civil and human rights for populations long oppressed by colonialism, but also organize to defend natural resources in their countries and prevent non-sustainable exploitation that leaves little for the people and nothing for future generations. We also see a deep questioning of the neoliberal economic model that promised development through private investment and forced governments to abandon basic needs programs. Many nations have rejected aspects of this model and are actively developing alternatives.

Argentina and Brazil's break with International Monetary Fund conditioning and Argentina's priority on rebuilding its society rather than paying off international debt following the crisis is another example of more people-oriented policies in the region. These efforts outside our borders represent an opportunity for us to not only support their independence but to reassess economic policies here at home too.

By adopting a positive good neighbor framework, we not only oppose intervention and harmful policies but identify common struggles that place us on the same side as the most vulnerable sectors of Latin American societies. To create a new kind of globalization that serves the interests of the poor and of the millions of people in all countries who are largely excluded from the benefits of top-down globalization today.

Solidarity

The vision of hemispheric relations as "Good Neighbors" obliges us to go beyond some of our traditional concepts of solidarity in the region. For a long time, Latin American solidarity implied developing "hands off" campaigns to prevent the U.S. government from engaging in illegal and unfair meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. Get out of Central America, end the embargo against Cuba, expose and condemn intervention in the southern cone—these solidarity campaigns enabled us to understand our particular responsibility as U.S. citizens for policies that hurt other people.

All this is, unfortunately, still needed. With the terrible example of the Iraqi occupation before us, we know that

efforts to oppose U.S. intervention are every bit as needed today as ever, and maybe even more so. We can already hear interventionist rumblings with regard to Venezuela and Bolivia and concrete plans in the case of Cuba.

A "good neighbor" policy, however, must move beyond opposing these U.S. policies toward other countries. Indeed, it even goes beyond supporting the efforts of people seeking equitable development, poverty relief, and freedom in Latin America. The basis of being a good neighbor is to recognize a commonality of interests for the neighborhood as an interconnected whole, to affirm common causes and shared values.

When Evo Morales wins the presidency in Bolivia and begins to implement policies to champion the rights of poor and indigenous people, he is striking a blow against racism and classism that improves our neighborhood. Racism and classism are sources of conflict and injustice in the world that we are fighting in all of our societies. When Brazil and Argentina block the imposition of a Free Trade Agreement in the Americas they turn back a model of economic integration that favors powerful transnational corporations over issues of public concern including access to healthcare, fair distribution of wealth, decent wages, full employment, and environmental protection.

These are great opportunities for us to do the same at home while strengthening their efforts abroad.

It's no secret that anti-U.S. sentiment is on the rise in Latin America since the invasion of Iraq. I see it in Mexico, the polls show it, and it is reflected in every trip President Bush and cabinet members have made to the region. But there is a big and important difference between now and the intense "anti-American" tides of the past, particularly in the seventies. That is that people in Latin America are making a clear and explicit distinction between the U.S. government and the U.S. people. If they still maintain that distinction—despite the re-election of Bush, despite initial U.S. public support for the invasion of Iraq, and despite growing anti-immigrant populist movements in border states—we have to prove ourselves worthy of being given the benefit of the doubt by actively opposing the U.S. policies that divide us. And it's time to demonstrate not only opposition, but a willingness to support the alternatives that are emerging in Latin America and increase links in order to build something new together.

In Conclusion

There are many who hear the phrase, Global Good Neighbor coupled with U.S. foreign policy and discard the concept as hopelessly idealistic. This is often the initial

reaction in Latin America and they certainly have a dark historical experience to back up their pessimism. But we also have a few experiences to prove that the citizens of the United States have the power to shift the course of U.S. foreign policy. What it takes is a collective and active determination to do it.

The Global Good Neighbor Ethic for International Relations is meant to be one catalyst among many for this process. It is a simple, value-based guideline, distilled from the best of our heritage and of our shared humanity. Because we're not alone—we're convinced that just like all of you are here today to challenge disparity, to break down the walls that separate us, inspired by your faith and informed by your convictions, there are many more back in your communities that are willing to do the same.

To change from viewing Latin America as the United States' backyard or as staging grounds for the geopolitical interests of the powerful, to really seeing those countries as equal neighbors in a neighborhood, requires a broad citizens' movement—not just convincing policymakers. That's why we see this as a living document, a starting point for discussions around kitchen tables, in church study groups, at schools, or in communities.

In that sense it isn't just a matter of "how the U.S. government can be a good neighbor" but how all of us can. Because in addition to influencing foreign policy, we can have an impact in our own lives by buying and promoting fair trade, encouraging intercultural respect and understanding in our communities, rejecting the "us vs. them" mentality that the administration encourages, and examining the effects of our daily actions on our global neighborhood.

I encourage you to think along with us about what it would mean to build a global good neighbor ethic in today's world, and what it would take to do it. There's really nothing unrealistic about applying a good neighbor

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ethic in this age of globalization. In fact, what's really unrealistic is to imagine that we can continue on our present course of initiating conflict, creating widening disparities between the rich and the poor, and causing irreparable environmental damage to the planet.

I mentioned before that Latin America in many ways has become the continent of hope. I really should say that it's all the Americas—North, Central, and South—together as neighbors, where hope is found. Because unless you all, citizens of the United States, make common cause with these other efforts there is little chance of moving dreams into reality. So thank you once again for the opportunity to be with you today. I wish you all the best in your endeavors here these few days and later going back into your communities and carrying on this work.

IRC Americas Program Director Laura Carlsen gave this as a presentation to the plenary of the Latin America track of Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington DC, March 11, 2006. The Americas Program can be found at www.americaspolicy.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

A Good Neighbor Ethic for International Relations
<http://ggn.irc-online.org/ggncontent/142>

U.S. Hegemony or Global Good Neighbor Policy?
<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3114>

En Español (Spanish version):
<http://www.ircamericas.org/esp/514>

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