

**“The Latin Americans:
Their Love-Hate Relationship with the United States”**

By

Ambassador Barbara Stephenson (Ret.)

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Amb. Stephenson set out to describe the extent to which the United States’ relations with the countries to our south have evolved, and in fact been transformed, since the closing of the Cold War era. Old-style political strongmen and left-right civil wars have largely passed from the scene.

Amb. Stephenson spoke glowingly of a recent trip to Panama, a country in which she had served previously. There, in 2018 she found a civilian government, open economy, declining poverty rates, and an emerging middle class. She said that Panama is a microcosm of Latin America’s broader transformation. This transformation is the culmination of long-term trends; namely:

- The transition from authoritarian to *democratic governments*.
 - She herself was involved in the talks which ended the 1979-’92 civil war in El Salvador and the relatively free and fair elections to the National Assembly which followed.
- The transition from closed to *open economies*.
 - Reliance on market mechanisms has facilitated free trade agreements, improved citizen welfare, and fostered regional integration.
- The move from exclusive to *more inclusive societies*.
 - In fact, Amb. Stephenson called the diffusion of political influence from elites to broader circles in society a *mega-trend*.
 - The addition of new interests and stakeholders, however, makes political governance more challenging.
- From isolation to *increased global engagement*.
 - More transparent and confident Latin governments increasingly participate in, for example, transnational security and law enforcement tasks.

The United States is recognized as having played a helpful role in bringing about this convergence of values. This has allowed Washington’s relationship with Latin countries to move from *paternalism to partnership*. But the durability of these relations cannot be taken for granted. Being the sole superpower at the end of the Cold War led to a certain amount of US complacency. But in the current strategic context, competitors such as China are increasingly asserting that the liberal democratic path is not the only one.

In this hemisphere we have no neighbors posing a threat to the US, we are self-sufficient in energy supplies, and have the world's largest reserves of fresh water and arable land. Amb. Stephenson suggested that Washington think of Latin America as a vital *strategic reserve*. This will help to ensure that the needle keeps pointing more in the direction of love than hate.

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