

Hope and Optimism, Improving Memory, Viewing America with Foreign Eyes
What Happens Next – 8.29.2021
Jorge Castañeda

Larry Bernstein:

Afghanistan, which is obviously in the news right now, but really not a strategic interest of the United States after the passing of Osama Bin Laden. What I thought you were going to say but didn't say was that in order for the US to be successful in its foreign policy, it would need the support of its allies. And with Afghanistan, when the United States began its war in Iraq, it passed Afghanistan to its NATO allies. But then they cut and ran and then left the United States managing it afterwards. And then it appeared that Biden grew tired and just decided it was the end of the run. What is the role of the allies in these foreign policy situations? And second, how do you persuade the allies to stick around? And then third when should we go home?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well, in terms of allies, you can brow beat people into supporting you, but if their heart's not in it, they will forsake you when they can. Bush kind of bullied Tony Blair into supporting the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. But of course, once Blair was out of office, that was the end of that. If you can't convince people of what you're doing, no matter how much that you brow beat them, your allies will not go along with you indefinitely.

And we're seeing this today. The allies want the Americans to remain in so they can evacuate everybody because they can't do it themselves. They can't ensure the security of the airport in Kabul on their own. They need the United States to do that. That's what the indispensable power means today. But they don't want American priorities to be the only factor in determining when the United States leaves. The airport, on August 31st, they want the Americans to take into account the fact that they need to bring a lot of people out and they need the Americans for security and military coverage.

The United States has to think in terms of soft power as the way to convince people, other countries, other governments, other institutions in the world, whether they are the United Nations or the international monetary fund or whatever, instead of just using clout, which might get you a couple of years or two or three years of support, but at the end of the day, it doesn't work. What works are American ideas, American culture, American civilization, as I say, American financing for civil society. I saw a calculation the other day that of the so-called trillion dollars that President Biden always mentions regarding money plowed into Afghanistan over these 20 years, something like 850 billion were devoted to military activities. That's not soft power. That's hard power.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about the Venezuela. It's been non-democratic. The economy is in chaos. There are millions of refugees in Colombia, some in Panama. A group has moved to Miami. What should the US do about it? They worked with the Organization of American States. They met

with the Brazilians and the Colombians and the Mexicans, and there was very little support in Mexico for either a hard power regime change in Venezuela. How do you think about how the US should react when there are problems like Venezuela in the region? Should Mexico have veto powers on that sort of decision-making? How would you recommend the United States organize a fighting force if it felt it was necessary in a place like Venezuela?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well, I start by saying, I can't conceive of any situation in which it would be desirable for the United States to intervene militarily in Venezuela or to encourage others to intervene militarily. First of all, it probably wouldn't work. Secondly, it would cost an enormous amount of money and lives. And thirdly, it's hard to say what real objectives would be attained. I mean, how important is Venezuela strategically to the United States?

There was a point when it was a major oil supplier of the United States, but what with shale oil and gas and renewables over the last 20 or so years, the United States probably no longer imports not even a million barrels a day from Venezuela, which can be replaced perfectly elsewhere.

I don't think the United States should give any ally, any friend, any neighbor veto power over what it does. But it should listen, and listening is not a strong suit for many Americans in foreign policy domain. I remember when there was an attempted coup against Hugo Chavez in April of 2002. And Condoleezza Rice was at the National Security Council and Colin Powell was at the State Department and we had developed a very good relationship. I was foreign minister at the time and one of the things we always talked about was Venezuela and I always said to both of them, "Look, let's talk before you do anything. You'll end up doing whatever you want anyway, but let's talk a few minutes before you make any, rush to any decisions."

Well, they never talked with us about the coup and Condoleezza Rice came out, like the New York Times supporting the coup right away and congratulating the perpetrators of the coup. Only for the coup to come tumbling down within 48 hours and Chavez was back in office. And it would have been relatively easy for people like myself and others in Latin America to have told the Americans, "Look, this coup doesn't sound right. We know coups. We do them for breakfast in Latin America, and this one doesn't look right. Let's wait a couple of days before committing too strongly."

You don't know give veto powers to anybody, but you want to listen, particularly in the case of, a case like Venezuela, which is remarkably intractable. In one way or another, a terrible government. Chavez and Maduro have been in office now for 22 years. They really have destroyed the country in every way that you described it. And they're still in power and there's nobody has been able to find a way to get rid of them democratically or through non-military means and nobody wants to resort to military means to get rid of them.

It is a tremendously intractable problem for the United States, for Mexico, for the Europeans. The Norwegians are now hosting talks between the opposition and the Maduro regime again. I don't think these will go anywhere like the ones before that took place in Santo Domingo and in Barbados. I don't think these will work any better because the Maduro regime is still able to hang on.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me move on onto Cuba. The Obama administration reached out to the Cubans to encourage a transfer to democratic power, opened up some of the trade and visitations. I went, for example, when I visited the country as part of a religious organization. What are your thoughts on what's going on in Cuba now? Do you see that reforming and becoming more democratic or do you think the Castro regime will last indefinitely?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well, it's certainly not becoming more democratic. We saw how the regime responded and how the current president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, who's still being overshadowed by Raúl Castro, how they responded to the protests on July 11th with widespread repression. Beating people up, trying them without lawyers, without family members in touch with them, and often in summary judgment. So it's certainly not being more democratic. If anything, it's closing up more than before.

The question here is what American policy and Latin American policy should be to this situation in Cuba? We know that the embargo hasn't worked in terms of regime change. We know that Latin American and trying to be nice to the Cubans and friendly with the Cubans, a bit like Mexico is now, doesn't work either in terms of changing Cuba. And we know also that Cuba continues to play a very important role in several Latin American countries, particularly in Venezuela, that we were just talking about.

My sense is that the Biden administration thought, for domestic political reasons, that Cuba was not an urgent priority. That it could leave it on a back-burner for a while before it got around to either returning to Obama's normalization of relations and rolling back all of Trump's decrees or regulations, making life more miserable for the Cubans, and that that didn't turn out to be entirely accurate as a policy. That because of the protests, because of COVID, because of the effects that the Trump sanctions have had in Cuba, because of increasing mismanagement of the economy by the Cubans, because of the diminishing of support from Venezuela, with Venezuelan oil and money for Cuba.

For all of these reasons, things in Cuba kind of got out of control, got out of hand. And that often means, more Cuban migration to the United States, either by boat through the Florida Straits or through Mexico, trying to reach Brownsville in Texas and then seek asylum. Which, although the dry feet, wet feet policy was abolished by Obama, Cubans are still allowed to enter the United States. Or rather once they enter the United States one way or another, they can seek asylum and not be deported back to Cuba. And the numbers have been rising very strikingly over the past few months since late 2020, and certainly over the past few months.

I think the Biden administration should have addressed this issue right away, because it should have known that things were going poorly in Cuba. And they should not have left purely

domestic considerations, Florida Senate elections in 2022, to be the exclusive driver of US policy towards Cuba, which is a little bit what they did.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's try another topic. And that's immigration from Mexico to the United States. It's been a very hot political issue, obviously in both the 2016 and 2020 campaigns. What do you think is the best way to reduce the chaos at the border? How do we persuade people not to enter the United States illegally?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well, the best way by far is to persuade them to enter legally. And that is perfectly doable given the size of the US economy, of the US population, and the demand for low skill, low wage labor in the United States, particularly now with the economic boom that is going on, and the enormous infrastructure projects that exist. Who's going to build Biden's highways? The Mexicans and Salvadorians and Guatemalans. It's not going to be Americans because they don't want to work in 100 degree heat for \$10, \$12 an hour. It's going to be the Mexicans mainly and other Central Americans are going to do that. So the best solution is to significantly increase the number of temporary work visas, H2As and H2Bs, mainly because those are the agricultural and service issues and construction workers, which have caps, but they can be waived by the executive.

And so, that's the first thing that is absolutely indispensable is to legally allow these people to enter because they will do jobs that Americans do not want to do, and they want to come to the United States and the numbers are relatively small. It looks terrible on television when you see 3,000 children in a tent camp in Texas. 3,000 children in the United States, a country of 330 million people. I think that the first thing is to understand that if you want people to not enter illegally, then you have to make it feasible for them to enter legally.

The second issue, which is very important is to legalize the 12 million people who are in the United States, half of which are Mexican, that do not have papers. Some of them have been in the United States for 25 years and they still don't have papers.

Building walls or deporting people, or throwing them out is not going to work if only because either you will have a lot of resistance in the US to doing nasty things. There are a lot of good people in the United States who don't like to see children being sent back to Honduras.

I think this is the way the US should view the immigration situation. I think it's the way the Biden people are viewing it, but I don't know how much political capital they want to spend on this in order to get it done compared with other priorities that they have. It's not clear to me that this is where they want to spend their political capital.

Larry Bernstein:

Switching topics to my hometown, the city of Chicago. Chicago is currently pretty evenly split population-wise between whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics, but the African-American population is in decline. It's falling by about 10,000 people a year and has been doing so for

about 20 years. The Hispanic population has been increasing quite dramatically. I imagine in 20 years-time, Chicago will be a majority Hispanic city

What does it mean for Chicago to be a majority Hispanic city in terms of how it's run? We have a black mayor, we've got a black head of the police. But when it becomes majority Hispanic, which I expect it to be in 20 years, African-American political power will have to decline relative to Hispanic power. I fully expect if it's a majority Hispanic city, we'll have a Hispanic mayor with Hispanic police chief, Hispanic head of education. And we have finite resources. And so resources, where they may go to the African-American community now they'll go to the Hispanic communities in the future. Do you expect there to be tension between those two communities once some of our US major cities become majority Hispanic?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well, I think there will be tensions. It's already a similar situation in Los Angeles now has clearly a larger Hispanic population than African-American population.

Although there's a logic to using the term people of color with regard to Latinos, African-Americans, Asian Americans, and others, et cetera, Native Americans, you can't really put everybody together.

The last census shows the Asian American population, but also the Hispanic or Latino population is making serious progress in terms of reducing the income gap, the education gap, the wealth gap, the opportunity gap with white Americans.

Whereas, the gaps with the African-American community remain pretty much the same as they were back in the 1960s. So there's a root cause to what you referred to as tensions, because it's not just that the Hispanic community will be larger in Chicago than the African-American community soon. At some point, we'll see when, but it's that it will probably also be more prosperous and with smaller gaps between it and the white community in Chicago.

Larry Bernstein:

In the 2020 presidential elections, the number of Hispanics switching parties to the Republicans was meaningful and played an important part in the race. There was a surprise on both sides of the aisle as to changing Hispanic voter preference. What do you make of that change? What's driving that? Should we expect it to continue and why are some Hispanics choosing the Republican Party?

Jorge Castañeda:

One of the important sectors of the Hispanic population that leaned towards Trump in 2020 was the Cuban, and to a lesser extent, Venezuelan population in South Florida, which has always been Republican. They became more Republican this time than they had been in previous years. Hillary Clinton already lost Florida to Trump after Obama had won it twice but the fact is that Cubans voted more and more for Trump than they did. Some Venezuelans who voted for Trump and against Biden because they bought onto the "Biden, the socialist" type of fake news, and because they were very happy with Trump's anti-Castro/anti-Maduro policies, and that made a difference.

Another area where apparently there was a bit of a shift was in the Southern Rio Grande valley areas of McAllen, Harlingen, reaching perhaps even to Brownsville, they're clearly Mexican-American who have been American citizens for five, six, seven generations or even more, apparently voted for Trump in larger numbers than they had in 2016 and 2012.

Apparently, there was a very active role played by the Border Patrol union, in those areas where they're very important. The Border Patrol officers in those areas of the country are all practically Mexican-American, and very conservative, and very pro-Trump, and very anti-immigration.

If you look at the overall situation, exclude the Cubans, and I mention this in my book, *America Through Foreign Eyes*, and the way the US electorate has changed, you have to exclude the Cubans, not because there's anything wrong with them, I have a great deal of sympathy there for that community because it fled a dictatorship under very adverse circumstances, but they are a very small minority of the overall Latino population. If you look at the big picture population, the Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorians, Hondurans, Ecuadorians, Puerto Ricans on the mainland, you'll see that still close to 70% of the non-Cuban/non-Venezuelan Hispanic voters, voted for Biden. And they turned out in record numbers.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session on a note of optimism. Jorge, what are you optimistic about?

Jorge Castañeda:

Well I'm very optimistic about America's capacity to reinvent itself. I think we are facing up to the huge challenges in terms of social inequality, racial inequality, poverty, violence. I think that we are really at a turning point in terms of American society facing these challenges and actually doing something about them.

I'm very optimistic about the Biden Administration's domestic intentions. Not so much its foreign policy part; I think the foreign policy team is much less competent than the domestic policy people. But I think Biden's two or three huge programs on infrastructure, on social issues, on helping families, et cetera, are really the pillars of building an American welfare state, which really never existed.

I thought that the demonstrations after the George Floyd assassination last year were exemplary. Regardless of isolated incidents here or there, I think the way the Biden people have tried to come up with all of these different policies and plans to rebuild that welfare state. And I think this is part of the United States of America's classic capacity for reinventing itself, and I'm very, very optimistic about it, regardless of the pitfalls, or the bumps in the road, which Biden, and his people, and the United States will obviously meet over the next few years.