

Obama's Mexican House Call

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Global Research, April 20, 2009

20 April 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [USA](#)

Mexico City. The posh and up market Polanco district where president Obama stayed was "locked down and turned into a virtual Bagdad style "green zone". The perimeter around his luxury hotel was sealed off to traffic and pederations where systematically searched. The street vendors which abound in Mexico City were temporary displaced for obvious security reasons. Mexico is not a safe place for American dignitaries these days it appears. An impressive deployment of Mexican troops, FBI agents and a plethora of security teams were mobilized on this occasion. At times the youthful and charismatic president or "man of the people compared to JFK who emanates almost cult like superstar appeal, was subjected to bunker like mobility.

Obama's movements were strictly confined to a limited area, unlike in Europe where he was able to stroll about in Strasbourg or walkabout almost gingerly in Prague . His 24 hour visit which began Thursday afternoon and ended Friday morning was limited to a "Los Pinos " (the Mexican White House) greetings ceremony complete with noisy schoolchildren waving flags of both nations, an overnight stay at the Inter Continental and a gala dinner I his honor (without his wife by his side) at the Archeological and history museum. In attendance, at the elaborate evening's banquet were 100 guests, carefully selected by the American embassy. The select list comprised a Mexican who's who of its most powerful business barons and members of this Latin American nation's corporate elite including, the billionaire and international investor, Carlos Slim.

The U.S president arrived into the city on Thursday afternoon, in his official limousine called affectionately "the beast", a gleaming glamorous version of an armored personal carrier really. He brought along an almost imperial retinue of advisors and top government officials with him, among them: Jim Jones, national security advisor, Steven Chu, secretary of energy, Janet Napolitano from Homeland security, Larry Summers, the White House chief economic council; John O. Brennan, the deputy national security advisor, Daniel Restrepo, U.S advisor on hemispheric affaires and finally Jeffrey Davidov, former U.S envoy during the Vincente Fox presidency (2000-2006) and special advisor to the president for the summit of the Americas.

On his agenda with his Mexican counterpart, Felipe Calderon was of course, the issue of security related to the ongoing drug war and arms trafficking. Other just as pressing matters such climate change, its impact on both states, the demands of Mexican farmers to renegotiate NAFTA to make the treaty more equitable for them, and the ongoing immigration issue or the legalization of 12 million "Latinos" living and working illegally in the

U.S was sidelined due to the border drug wars.

Why did Obama come to Mexico ?

¿A que viene Obama? (Why did Obama come?) was the question asked the most in the Mexican media ahead of his visit it seemed. Obama's first "working visit" to Mexico as president comes at a time when relations are severely strained between Washington and Mexico City . Issues like the flow of narcotics to the north and the back flow of high caliber weaponry which originates in the U.S, have frayed bilateral ties. In a historical context Obama, came almost 95 years after the notorious "Tampico affair" which led to the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two neighboring states and prompted U.S president Woodrow Wilson to dispatch a contingent of U.S marines to seize and occupy the Mexican port of Vera Cruz on April 21st, 1914 during the upheavals of the Mexican revolution.

The port city was bombed twice by the U.S Navy with large civil casualties being incurred on the Mexican side. In an article entitled a "Open letter to Barak Obama", (La Jornada , 17-04-2009) which the U.S president is unlikely to have read, the columnist Gilerto Lopez y Rivas gives readers a historical refresher course which rings alarm bells now; chronicling the military interventions into Mexico by U.S troops when diplomacy simply failed to deliver the desired results.

In his provocative piece, he then questions the legitimacy of the Mexican presidency: "... you should know [Mr. president] that millions of Mexican consider Felipe Calderon a president who came to power by means of an electoral fraud with the support of the military and the complicity of leaders and governors of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (The Institutional Revolutionary Party , which governed Mexico for over 70 years) ... This governing group has brought the country into the current disaster and seeks to consummate a silent annexation with the United States." Is such treasonous treachery really afoot or this exaggerated nationalist rhetoric? That's hard to say, but one thing is for sure the future of Felipe Calderon's presidency seems to be tied to Obama's actions or inactions when it comes to border security issue. The White House for its part has put all its chips on Calderon, betting he can vanquish the violent drug lords (with 1.4 billion in U.S assistance wreaking havoc in the country and spilling over into the U.S. This is a risky gambit.

Dr. Obama's patient president Calderon.

As Miguel Angel Granados Chapas, one of Mexico's most esteemed journalists and observers of the local political scene pointed out in his daily one man morning radio show last week,

Obama's visit to Mexico was like a quick check up , to assess and take the weakening pulse of his designated crusader against the drug villains , Felipe Calderon. Calderon is a man beleaguered by the increasing violence in his country. And his presidency is in trouble too. The legitimacy of electoral his victory in 2006 remains marred by unrelenting accusations of electoral fraud. 50% of the Mexican voting public repudiated him in the July, 2006 elections. Furthermore, mid term congressional elections are coming again in July. And a very high abstention rate is anticipated this time around; this is hardly a rousing endorsement of the PAN (National Action party) party president.

For many Mexicans it seems Calderon not only "stole" the elections but he also has failed miserably to bring stability and security to his fellow citizens. He is losing "his" drug war. For this reason, Obama has come to prop up his foundering counterpart and try to rescue and extricate Washington 's man, from a perilous quandary. Yet great expectations, on both sides were dampened by harsh and sobering realities; the violent struggle among Mexican drug lords battling for control of the narcotics trade, compounded by a civil war like struggle between the well armed cartels and the federal armed forces who are supposed to put them out of business. But few experts expect this very lucrative trade to diminish any time soon. There's just too much cash involved and corruption on both sides of the U.S Mexican border to curb or even control the two way "free trade" of narcotics and weapons.

A "new era "in the bilateral ties or a simulated change?

A "new era " in bilateral ties was hailed during Obama's visit. But as Laura Carlsen, a specialist on Latin American affairs based in Mexico City puts it in her assessment of the visit: " President Obama's visit to Mexico produced vague and contradictory statements, centered on worn-out strategies. Many people who had hoped for a new approach that would seek to redress the inequities of the binational relationship will find little in these declarations to pin their hopes on" (The Huffington Post, 17-04-2009).

In that sense, the visit was high flying in grandiloquent praise for Calderon from Obama and vice versa. It was also a bit of schmooze session in which the Mexican president had hoped some of Obama's magic might rub off on him as well. Beyond the handshakes and back patting few substantive measures were agreed upon to deal with the drug war. It looked as if the White Houses wanted to reassure skittish Americans that Mexico was now on the map and a top priority for the Obama administration.

Carlsen sees it as also reassuring the Mexican side: "These overtures no doubt served to decrease tensions between the two governments that built up following U.S. statements of the Mexico as a near "failed state" that was losing a grip on its own territory to drug cartels, and a potential national security threat ." The snag in the U.S Mexican game plan however, she writes could be that , "by focusing the trip on the person of Calderon and seeking to bolster his leadership rating, Obama forgets that Calderon is a polemical president in a deeply divided nation as a result of both his rightwing policies and the doubts of legitimacy that hang over his presidency."

Nevertheless, the White house strategists have tied outcome of the drug war to the fate of the Calderon presidency. Calderon for his part sees it differently: the ball is in the U.S court. Everything from limiting the flow of high caliber arms into Mexico from the U.S side to immigration (Obama promised Calderon to achieve sweeping migration reform, despite a hostile U.S Congress and rising protectionism north of the border).

Hence, Obama's patient is ill and the U.S knows it. But by rushing to his bedside Obama hopes his near cult like status and popularity abroad can magically cure what ills Calderon and his country. But besides the drug war, Calderon also has to deal with the impact of the global financial crisis which is hitting home hard which began north of the border. Recently he asked for a \$ 47 billion USD credit line or loan from the IMF as a preventive measure or to bolster the wobbly pesos and offset potential speculative attacks against the historically wobbly currency.

Mr. Obama tear down this border wall!

Ronald Reagan on a visit to West Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987, implored his Soviet counterpart to break down barriers to end the cold war. "Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall! " He exclaimed to cheerful throngs of cold war weary, Germans divided for decades. Mexico and the U.S may not be on the opposite sides of an ideological struggle today, but none the less there is an irony here. While Obama stood "shoulder to shoulder" with his Mexican host and expounded on the close and neighborly ties and shared values of both nations, the U.S Department of homeland security proceeded with the construction (613 miles so far) for the so called "border fence" meant to deny Mexican migrants their chance to achieve the increasingly elusive "American dream". The militarization of the border area continues apace, despite the flowery verbiage at the highest levels. Perhaps this huge fence can be interpreted as a "Mending wall", the title of a poem by Robert frost from which the adage "good fences make good neighbors" originated. But Mexican may not see it this way.

Obama previously came from a "borderless Europe". Yet North America remains a divided continent in terms of borders and wealth and opportunity. The equal partnership looks more uneven than ever before. There is however, thankfully no more talk publically of Mexico being the U.S' "backyard" but as Jesus Velasco Marquez summed up the state of the relationship "The United States will not change the position by which Mexico must submit to [the U.S] its strategy." (La Cronica , 13-04-2009). A strategy whose success or failure, from now on it seems depends on the fate and future of Felipe Calderon.

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