



Lost in the Americas

President Bush's Strategy-Free Trip to Latin America

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*Should I become president, I will look South, not as an afterthought,
but as a fundamental commitment of my presidency.*

George W. Bush, Miami, FL, August 25, 2000



President Bush is set to depart this week on a five-country tour of the Americas that will underscore how miserably he has failed to deliver on his promise six years ago to revolutionize relations in the Americas. No doubt the cooperative tone the president will strike on the trip will mask the stagnant policy approaches that have guided U.S. relations with the Americas for most of President Bush's administration. But rhetoric is not enough.

President Bush travels to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico at a time of profound political, social, and economic change throughout the Americas. As a result of six years of neglect and mismanagement, the United States lacks a coherent strategy for maximizing the opportunities and managing the challenges those changes present. Neither six days of presidential photo opportunities nor one year (out of seven) of engagement with the region can fill those voids.

President Bush has never lacked inspirational rhetoric regarding the Americas, regularly trumpeting the need for cooperation and solidarity among countries of the hemisphere. Over time, however, there has been precious little reality behind that rhetoric. In those rare instances in which the Bush administration has focused on the Americas it has done so in a manner that harkens to the Cold War.

Such neglect interrupted by anachronism has alienated many throughout the Americas, in and out of government, who would otherwise welcome U.S. engagement and leadership. U.S. prestige and influence in the Americas is at its lowest point in generations, a reality that will affect U.S. policies and interests for decades to come. Only innovation and boldness can help break this downward spiral and create an effective strategic vision for the Americas. His new-found social justice rhetoric notwithstanding, the president's policy agenda on his six-day swing will reflect little of either.

Continued U.S. support for Plan Colombia, which makes Colombia the largest recipient of U.S. assistance outside the Middle East and Afghanistan, breaks no new ground. Variations on the theme of "trade, not aid" in Guatemala, and perhaps even Uruguay, fails to reflect changing realities throughout the region, where trade-based policies have failed to address popular demands for economic advancement.

Any talk by Bush in Mexico of his support for immigration reform is simply more of the same without committing the necessary political capital in the United States to achieve it. And in Brazil, the president's new policy initiative in support of alternative energy development will be timid and incomplete. Absent meaningful commitment and action by the United States, the transformative possibilities of an enhanced U.S.-Brazil ethanol relationship will be left largely untapped.

Similarly, the administration's new Central American regional anti-gang initiative, which does offer welcome support for countries struggling against destabilizing criminal activity, naively places almost exclusive reliance on enforcement rather than adequately addressing community-based prevention programs.



Had the president's trip occurred at the beginning of his first term of office and not as he limps to the finish line, the rhetoric and symbolism that will be its calling cards may have sufficed. Not now. As a country-by-country look at key issues facing the president on his trip reveals, such minimal engagement is no longer enough.

Brazil

U.S. policy toward the Americas has long been plagued by the misapplication of policy approaches formulated elsewhere in the world to incongruous circumstances in the Western Hemisphere. The president's trip provides an historic opportunity to turn that dynamic on its head by reorienting U.S.-Brazil relations. (See our [Brazil by the Numbers](#) for a quick snapshot of the importance of those bilateral relations.)

U.S. national interests of revitalizing our economy, enhancing long-term energy security and combating global climate change should be central to a new strategic vision for the Americas. Creating a dynamic cooperative relationship between the United States and Brazil with a foundation in renewable fuels would be a crucial step forward. Such complementary action in this arena would help align U.S. policy in the Americas with a comprehensive reorientation of U.S. agricultural, development, and trade policy that has the promise to reshape our future.

Although the president's trip will take a step in the right direction, we need more than rhetoric and technical cooperation agreements on ethanol. It is time to take concrete steps to help create the global market that biofuels need to be competitive with carbon-based fuels. We must provide greater U.S. market access for Brazilian ethanol and enhance cooperation with Brazil to create alternative fuel infrastructure and production capacity throughout the Americas, beginning with our poorest neighbors.

The private sector will play a crucial role in the expansion of the alternative fuel market across the Americas. But the U.S. and Brazilian governments must help create the conditions for success and be willing to make key startup investments.

Uruguay

Although it is possible to fashion a plausible strategic rationale for the inclusion of Uruguay on the President's itinerary, the stop appears to underscore the not-so-hidden motivation for the President's trip as whole—making a show of attempting to counter the perceived influence of Hugo Chávez. That President Bush stopping to have his picture taken with Uruguay's left-of-center President Tabaré Vázquez amounts to a noteworthy event demonstrates how much work the neglect and mismanagement of the past six years has unnecessarily created for the United States in the Americas. (See [Uruguay by the Numbers](#))



There is no significant number of Uruguayans living in the United States or U.S. citizens living in Uruguay. The United States today provides virtually no assistance to the Uruguayan government (although Washington did help Uruguay during its 2002 financial crisis). President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal year 2008 contains only one request for Uruguay—\$187 million in International Military Education Training.

A small member of MERCOSUR, the South American trade organization comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, Uruguay is the only country on the President's itinerary for which the United States is not the principal source of imported goods. Despite the recently signed U.S.-Uruguay Trade and Investment Framework Agreement and growing Uruguayan disenchantment with MERCOSUR, there appears to be little appetite in Uruguay to sign up for the Bush Administration's panacea for what ails the Americas—a free trade agreement with the United States.

In fact, the president's visit, which has touched off political controversy within the Vázquez government, may well spark large scale protests in Montevideo and could complicate rather than improve bilateral relations with Uruguay.

Colombia

President Bush's stop in Colombia will put an inadvertent spotlight on another traditional short-coming of U.S. policy toward the Americas—the over-personalization of policy. In dealing with the Americas, perhaps more so than with any other part of the world, the United States tends to simplify complex issues into single individuals upon whom we place either a white or black hat.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is the latest wearer of a white hat who faces a quickly spiraling controversy that may permanently tarnish his reputation and unduly complicate the pursuit of U.S. interests in Colombia. The “para-politics” scandal that has begun to expose long rumored connections between the country's governing class and its paramilitaries poses a significant problem for the Bush administration.

It does so not because U.S. interests in Colombia of fighting drugs and promoting security have changed as a result of the scandal. They have not. Rather, as the scandal inches closer to President Uribe with the arrest of eight of his supporters in the Colombian Congress and his former confidant and former director of the Colombian secret police, the personification of U.S. interest in the person of President Uribe may well distract from the need to continue supporting Colombia.

Regardless of where the chain of connection between the paramilitaries and Colombia's governing class leads, there is a profoundly important silver lining in the “para-politics” scandal that should be a clarion call for the Bush Administration as it shapes future U.S. assistance to Colombia. That some of Colombia's governing institutions have the wherewithal to tackle this daunting problem is a welcome development.



Impunity has long plagued Colombia. If the “para-politics” investigation can bring an end to this line of impunity, it could mark a turning point for the better in Colombia’s long struggle for peace and stability.

U.S. support for Colombia, to the tune of nearly \$5 billion in the past seven years, has helped stabilize the country. Stability in Colombia is in the long-term interest of the United States, but to advance core U.S. interests that stability must begin to infringe upon the largely unchecked flow of drugs from Colombia to the United States. To the extent Colombia’s drug-related problems can be overcome in Colombia, it will depend, in part, on the introduction of functioning civilian authority into parts of the country that have almost never been subject to such control.

U.S. assistance, which has overwhelmingly tilted toward increasing the fighting and enforcement capacity of Colombia’s Armed Forces and national police, must be reoriented, at least in part, to do more to support such efforts. Combined with sustainable, alternative development, the introduction of civilian authority into areas long monopolized by guerillas or paramilitaries should help Colombia break from its generational cycles of violence that are now funded by illicit drug revenues.

The formal insertion of Colombia’s paramilitaries into its governing structures makes this task more difficult. President Bush must make unmistakably clear that the dedication of sufficient resources and security for those investigating the para-politics scandal and for potential witnesses, including those who may have information that is embarrassing, or worse, to important Colombian political figures, is essential—even if doing so makes his close ally uncomfortable. (See Colombia by the Numbers)

Guatemala

Guatemala is a country that highlights the increasingly interconnected nature of the Americas and the possibilities, perils, and imperatives for the United States and the rest of the Americas associated with that interconnection.

The most obvious force drawing the United States and Guatemala closer together is the fact that more than one in 10 Guatemalans live in the United States today. In 2005, Guatemala received nearly \$3 billion in remittances, most of it originating in the United States, amounting to more than 10 percent of the country’s annual Gross Domestic Product. Although remittance flows are essentially equal to trade flows between Guatemala and the United States, President Bush is likely to highlight Guatemala’s membership in the Central America Free Trade Agreement as the touchstone of the vibrant and mutually beneficial economic relationship between the United States and Guatemala.

The president should instead reflect on the true nature of the economic relationship between the United States and Guatemala and the main engine in that relationship—economic migration from Guatemala to the United States. Falling victim to the tired paradigm of “trade, not aid,” President Bush’s proposed budget for the next fiscal year contains only \$35.8 million in total assistance funds for Guatemala. The United States must do better in helping Guatemala achieve sustained economic growth and development.



A renewed U.S. commitment to social investment like that embodied in the Social Investment and Economic Development Fund proposed by Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) would increase the funding available to marry effective social investment with smart trade policies for the benefit of countries such as Guatemala. Such assistance is essential for those adversely affected or missed entirely by increased trade. Greater economic growth in Guatemala will help address the root causes that lead too many of its citizens to take the attributes of hard work, risk taking, and initiative that are crucial for any country's long-term economic sustainability abroad.

Changing the social and economic dynamic in one of the region's poorest countries would also help undermine the most insidious connection tying the United States and Guatemala together—transnational gangs. Although President Bush is nearly certain to hail the anti-gang initiative recently announced by Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez and his counterparts in Central America, that initiative is, at best, a half solution.

Mimicking previous failures to deal with all law enforcement-related issues in the Americas as something that can be enforced out of existence, the new anti-gang initiative places more faith on stepped up enforcement than experience suggests is merited. The most successful anti-gang efforts in Central America and the United States, where Central America's gang problem largely began before being deported to the region, have combined smart enforcement with prevention and community-based tactics.

U.S. anti-gang initiatives in the region need to do more than pay lip service to these lessons. They need to mirror them. (See *Guatemala by the Numbers*)

Mexico

One of the most important bilateral relationships the United States has in the world today is with Mexico. Unfortunately, it has not been treated as such.

Although the U.S.-Mexico relationship reaches far beyond the issue of immigration, the enactment of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States has been transformed into a condition for moving toward the kind of strategic partnership with Mexico that President Bush has long promised and failed to deliver. As long as the last definitive statement of U.S. policy toward Mexico is the Secure Fence Act of 2006, which could result in a 700-mile fence along the 2,000-mile border, there is little reason to believe Mexico will be treated with the strategic importance it so clearly merits.

As is the case for the entire trip, the true measure of success for the president's Mexico visit will be what he does when he returns to Washington, not the lofty rhetoric he invokes on the road. The United States and Mexico need to get the current ugly immigration debate in the United States behind them. Leaving behind the animosity generated in search of (mis)perceived political gain north of the border is essential so that the United States can begin tackling the issues that lie at the heart of the U.S.-Mexico relationship in a serious manner.



The political window for enacting thoughtful reform will likely close before migrant workers complete next fall's apple harvest. If the president is serious about reform, he needs to stop just talking a good game and start using whatever political capital he has left to help drive bipartisan consensus in Congress. Specifically, he should enlist support from the non-nativist elements of his party in both houses of Congress to help rapidly enact comprehensive immigration reform.

Although it is absurd to think the United States can effectively address the immigration challenges it faces today without the meaningful involvement of Mexico in the discussion, President Bush has taken that approach in recent years. Paradoxically, unless the president can push comprehensive immigration reform across the finish line it will be impossible to focus the U.S. body politic on the policies we need to help generate the economic growth and labor market stability necessary to benefit both Mexico and the United States in the long term.

Well-intentioned calls for a North American Investment Fund to help prime the pump for the kind of infrastructure, education, and health investment that are so crucial to Mexico's and the United States' shared future stand no chance of proceeding unless the president can deliver on immigration reform. Talk of measures to increase competitiveness in North America or for greater counter-narcotics and law enforcement cooperation are important and welcome. But they distract from what must be the central task at hand—comprehensive immigration reform. (See Mexico by the Numbers)

Conclusion

The United States needs to reorient its policy toward the Americas to adequately reflect the interconnections that define the region today. Gone must be the days when U.S. policy toward the Americas was purely a creature of neglect, reaction (or over-reaction), and crisis management. The clear-headed pursuit of U.S. interests in the region would make the United States stronger, more prosperous, and more secure. It would also help further democracy with social and economic development throughout the Americas—an interest that benefits the entire hemisphere.

Perhaps, in time, we will look back on President Bush's trip as the first step toward the kind of strategic approach to the Americas that is so desperately needed. The president's track record in the Americas suggests, however, that it instead will be understood as the final empty symbolic gesture of a journey that began with great promise, but ended with so little accomplished.



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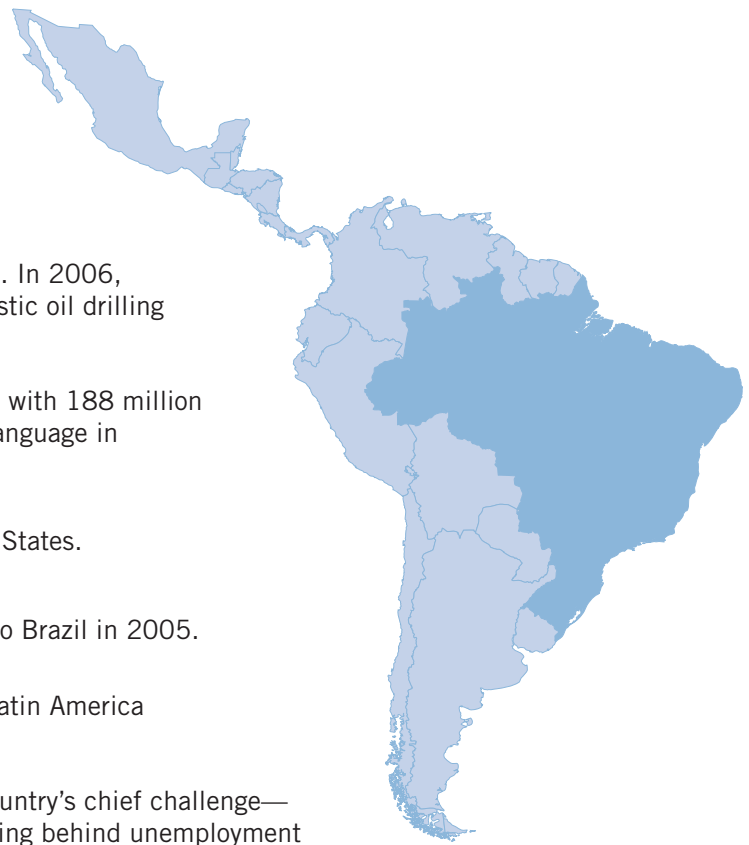
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Brazil by the Numbers

Rankings, Ratings, and Sundry Facts



- 0** Brazil's dependence on energy imports is exactly zero. In 2006, Brazil achieved energy independence based on domestic oil drilling and ethanol production.
- 1** Brazil is the most populous country in Latin America, with 188 million people. More people speak Portuguese as their first language in South America than Spanish.
- 1.1** Brazil is 1.1 times the size of the continental United States.
- 2.7** Billion dollars were remitted from the United States to Brazil in 2005.
- 6** Sixth highest Gross Domestic Product per capita in Latin America of \$5,176.55 as of 2006.
- 7** Only seven percent of Brazilians view crime as the country's chief challenge—despite international media attention on crime—ranking behind unemployment (20 percent) and health (14 percent).
- 9** Ninth-largest economy in the world measured by Purchasing Power Parity.
- 9.6** Brazil's unemployment rate of 9.6 percent is the eighth highest in Latin America as of 2006.
- 19** Percentage of Brazilians with a favorable opinion of President Bush, compared with 28 percent with a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro, and 17 percent with a favorable opinion of Hugo Chavez.
- 19.2** Percentage of Brazilian exports that go to the United States, Brazil's top trading partner as of 2005.
- 31** Percentage of Brazilians who live below the poverty line, the fifteenth-highest in Latin America.
- 40** Percent share of ethanol that has replaced Brazil's non-diesel gasoline consumption.
- 54** Cent-per-gallon tariff that is levied on Brazilian ethanol imported into the United States.
- 76** Percentage of Brazilians who have at least a "fair" opinion of President Lula de Silva.
- 70** Percent share of global ethanol production by Brazil and the United States together. Brazil is the world's leading ethanol exporter.
- 70** Percentage of vehicles sold in Brazil that are flex-fuel models using ethanol or gasoline.
- 600,000–1.2 M** Estimated number of Brazilians in the United States.

Colombia by the Numbers

Rankings, Ratings, and Sundry Facts

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- 1** The United States is Colombia's top trading partner, accounting for 28.5 percent of its imports, followed by Mexico (8.3 percent), China (7.6 percent), Brazil (6.5 percent), and Venezuela (5.7 percent). The United States is also the top destination for Colombian exports, receiving 41.8 percent of all exports in 2005, the last year full data was available.
 - 1** Million Colombians live in the United States.
 - 2.2** Billion dollars were remitted from the United States to Colombia in 2005.
 - 3** Third-most-populous country in Latin America with 43,593,035 Colombians as of July 2006.

Three major armed groups operate inside the country: The 40-year old Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC based on the group's Spanish acronym; the National Liberation Army, or ELN, with which the Colombian government is in preliminary peace talks; and the recently demobilized United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC. Each is an international terrorist organization according to the U.S. State Department.
 - 4** Fourth highest unemployment rate in Latin America.
 - 5** Fifth largest recipient of U.S. assistance and the largest outside the Middle East & Afghanistan; Colombia is slated to receive approximately \$600 million in fiscal year 2007.
 - 8** Number of members of the Colombian Congress who have been jailed in recent months as part of the country's escalating "para-politics" scandal linking politicians and Colombia's paramilitary organizations.
 - 14** Fourteenth highest Gross Domestic Product per capita in Latin America at \$2,763.32 as of 2006.
 - 15** Among the top 15 suppliers of oil to the United States, exporting more than 260,000 barrels of oil a day.
 - 39** Percentage of Colombians with favorable opinion of President Bush, compared with 21 percent with a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, and 31 percent with a favorable view of Brazilian President Lula de Silva.
 - 49.2** Percentage of Colombians living below the poverty line; seventh highest in Latin America.
 - 60** Percent share of the U.S. fresh cut flower market supplied by Colombia, the world's second-largest exporter of fresh cut flowers.
 - 73** Approval rating of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez.
 - 90** Percent share of the cocaine consumed in the United States that is produced in Colombia.
 - 170,000** The number of people estimated to have been forced to flee their homes last year by Colombia's internal conflicts. Decades of violence in Colombia have created one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world, estimated to include more than 3 million people as of 2006.

Guatemala by the Numbers

Rankings, Ratings, and Sundry Facts

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- 1 Nobel Peace Prize winner running for president in Guatemala's September 2007 presidential elections. Indigenous rights leader Rigoberta Menchu announced on February 21 her intention to seek the Guatemalan presidency.
 - 1.5 Million Guatemalans are estimated to live in the United States.
 - 2 Second-highest percentage of its citizens living below the poverty line in Latin America with 75 percent living under those conditions.
 - 2.9 Billion dollars were remitted from the United States to Guatemala in 2005, with comparable amounts of exports from Guatemala to the United States (\$3.5 billion) and imports (\$3.1 billion) from the United States.
 - 5 Fifth lowest Gross Domestic Product per capita in Latin America of \$2,107.53 as of 2006.
 - 7 The total number of signatory countries to the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement, which came into effect in Guatemala on July 1, 2006. The signatories are the United States, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. Only Costa Rica has yet to ratify the treaty.
 - 7.5 Percent of the Guatemalan work age population that is unemployed.
 - 9 Ninth most populous country in Latin America, with 12 million Guatemalans as of 2006.
 - 30 Percentage of Guatemalans with a favorable opinion of President Bush, compared with 27 percent with a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro, 25 percent with a favorable opinion of Hugo Chavez, and 31 percent with a favorable view of Brazilian President Lula de Silva.
 - 36 The number of years of internal armed conflict before the Guatemalan government in 1996 signed peace accords with the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) to bring an end to a civil war that claimed 200,000 lives.
 - 45 Percent approval rating of President Oscar Berger.
 - 50.1 Percentage of Guatemala's exports that go to the United States, its top trading partner, followed by El Salvador (12.1 percent), Honduras (7.3 percent) and Mexico (4 percent).
 - 340 The estimated number of *pandillas* or gangs in Guatemala with a total of more than 8,000 members nationwide.

Mexico by the Numbers

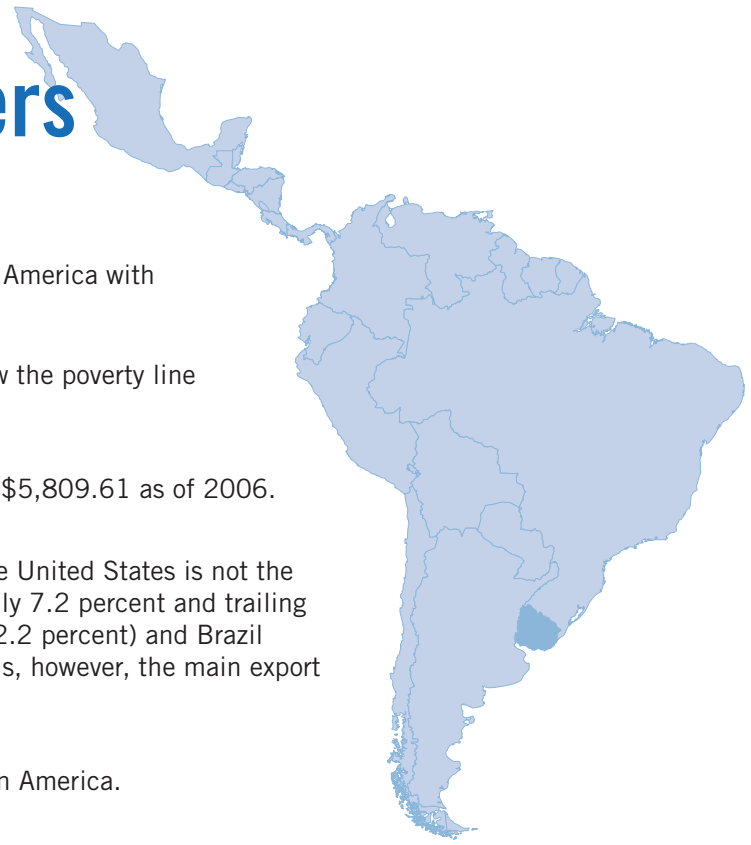
Rankings, Ratings, and Sundry Facts



- 1** An estimated 1 million U.S. citizens live in Mexico, representing the largest number of U.S. citizens living outside the country and 25 percent of all U.S. citizens living abroad.
- 2** Mexico is the second most populous country in Latin America, with 107,449,525 people living in the country as of 2006.
- 2** Second-largest supplier of oil to the United States, with Mexico exporting a total of nearly 2 million barrels a day out of a total production of nearly 3.5 million barrels a day, according to a 2005 estimate.
- 2** Second-highest per capita Gross Domestic Product at \$7,593.53 in Latin America as of 2006.
- 4.6** Percent unemployment rate, the third lowest in Latin America as of 2006.
- 5** The number of Mexican states to which Mexican President Felipe Calderon has deployed approximately 24,000 federal police and troops in a crackdown on drug trafficking organizations across Mexico since taking office on December 1, 2006.
- 9** Ninth-largest percent of people in Latin America living below the poverty line. Forty percent of Mexicans live below the poverty line.
- 15** Number of Mexicans extradited to the United States by Mexico on drug trafficking charges as part of a concerted effort to crack down on drug trafficking organizations in Mexico at the beginning of President Calderon's term.
- 16** Million Mexicans are estimated to live in the United States.
- 23.5** Billion dollars were remitted from the United States to Mexico in 2005.
- 29** Percentage of Mexicans with a favorable opinion of President Bush, compared with 22 percent with a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro, 13 percent with a favorable opinion of Hugo Chavez, and 40 percent who have a favorable view of Brazilian President Lula de Silva.
- 45** The per pound price of corn tortillas, a basic staple of the Mexican diet, which has more than doubled in the past year. The price increase, spurred in part by the ethanol boom in the United States, has created financial hardship for Mexico's poor who, on average, get 40 percent of their daily protein from consumption of corn tortillas.
- 60** President Calderon's approval rating.
- 85.7** Percentage of Mexico's exports that go to the United States, its top trading partner, which is the source of more than 50 percent of its imports. No other country accounts for more than 8 percent of Mexico's imports or exports.
- 226.9** Percentage increase in trade between the United States and Mexico since the inception of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994.
- 400** The number of people who die each year attempting unauthorized crossings of the U.S.-Mexico each year, according to Mexican officials.
- 700** The number of miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border mandated by the Secure Fence Act that President Bush signed into law in October 2006. Mexican President Calderon has called the construction of the fence along the 2,000-mile border "offensive."

Uruguay by the Numbers

Rankings, Ratings, and Sundry Facts



2 Uruguay has the second smallest population in Latin America with approximately 3.4 million residents as of 2006.

3 The 22 percent of Uruguayan households living below the poverty line is the third lowest in Latin America.

4 Fourth-highest per capita Gross Domestic Product of \$5,809.61 as of 2006.

7.2 Unlike any other country on President Bush's trip, the United States is not the main source of imports to Uruguay, accounting for only 7.2 percent and trailing behind Uruguay's MERCOSUR partners Argentina (22.2 percent) and Brazil (21.7 percent) and Russia (11.0 percent). The U.S. is, however, the main export destination for Uruguayan products (20.6 percent).

10.5 Percent unemployment rate, the sixth highest in Latin America.

12 Percentage of Uruguayans with a favorable opinion of President Bush, compared with 28 percent with a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro, 32 percent with a favorable opinion of Hugo Chavez, and 31 percent with a favorable view of Brazilian President Lula de Silva.

22 It has been 22 years since a string of military-dominated governments ceded control to democratically-elected civilian government in Uruguay. In November 2006, Juan Maria Bordaberry, one of the presidents during military rule, was arrested in connection with the early 1970s assassinations of two Uruguayan legislators.

34 Only 34 percent of Uruguayans surveyed in 2006 believed someone who was born poor could end up becoming rich, leaving the percentage of Uruguayans with that belief last among the 18 countries surveyed. In contrast, 74 percent of Peruvians believed in the possibility of significant economic mobility, tops among those surveyed.

39 Percentage of Uruguayans who identified unemployment as the chief problem facing their country in 2006. Second was the economy at 10 percent.

62 Approval rating of President Tabaré Vázquez. Vázquez, then mayor of Montevideo, presented President George H.W. Bush the keys to the city in 1990.

110 Million dollars were remitted to Uruguay in 2005.

Center for American Progress



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