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A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON  
UNITED STATES - LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS

Carlos Fuentes\*

Q: Do you think the U.S. suffers an historical amnesia?

A: Yes. It has a different relationship to its past than we Latin Americans do. We know that we must reclaim our past because so much of it is undocumented. That is not quite the same as amnesia. The U.S. has a voluntary amnesia because it is made for the future. The U.S. saw itself as a country for the future in time and space. It would be the most modern country. It would continue to be modern until it collapsed with age. That's happening now.

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\* Carlos Fuentes served as Mexico's Ambassador to France from 1975-77. He is the author of several books, including WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAN, AURA, AND THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ. He is also the author of several volumes of essays and criticisms and is a contributor to the New York Times Editorial Page.

The interview was conducted by Angel Ramón Rivera at Dartmouth University on March 4 and 5, 1981 where Mr. Fuentes was a visiting professor. The interview was aired as a television program on the WGBH series, LA PLAZA in May, 1981. The producer of the program was Mercedes Sabio. Raquel Ortiz was the Executive Producer. The transcript appears in print for the first time with the permission of the WGBH Educational Foundation.

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Since his inauguration, President Reagan's stance on Nicaragua and El Salvador suggests that the threat of United States involvement in Latin America is still believed to be an effective foreign policy, ensuring compliance with United States interests. Contemporary domestic concern regarding the effectiveness of such a foreign policy is evidenced by a Bill Moyers commentary on the CBS Evening News in March 1982, wherein he documents the long history of United States involvement in Latin America and raises questions as to its results:

Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America have in common our participation in the utopian vision. The New World was Europe's invention. Its Utopia, what Europe could not have, would take place in the New World. Latin Americans know that utopia failed. It ended in genocide, slavery, oppression, injustice and the failure of its political and economic enterprises. But the U.S. does not know this. Until Vietnam, they thought utopia was successful. Vietnam overturned their self-confidence. Neither of us want to admit our failure, because it would negate our utopian calling. The U.S. displays historical amnesia, especially in interpreting its own history. Do the existence of black slaves fit into the concept of

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(Editor's Note continued)

"All in all, according to one congressional record, the U.S. since 1798 has intervened militarily fourteen times in Mexico, thirteen times in Cuba, eleven times in Panama, ten times in Nicaragua, nine times in the Dominican Republic, seven times in Columbia, seven times in Honduras, five times in Haiti, three times in Puerto Rico, and twice in Guatemala. The results of this long show of muscle have been mixed. The Dominican Republic today is democratic, but Guatemala is today one of the worst violators of human rights in the world. Friendly regimes have protected our investments, sales, and bases, but often to the detriment of their own people. And our embrace of dictators on the right has made it difficult to deal with their successors on the left."  
(Reprinted with the permission of C.B.S.)

Carlos Fuentes argues that the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy can be judged only in light of the long history of U.S. in Latin America. Mr. Fuentes concludes that the U.S. must recognize the effects of such past involvement and discontinue its traditional, self-defeating foreign policy of brute force. Such a foreign policy can only result in unifying opposition to the U.S. It hinders the development of a dialogue between the U.S. and Latin America. Mr. Fuentes suggests that establishing such a dialogue with the Third World may ultimately be in the best interests of the U.S., if the U.S. has the foresight to perceive this.

liberty for all under the Bill of Rights? Such contradictions have always existed . . . Jefferson, the father of the Declaration of Independence, had slaves. The U.S. tried to overcome this through the Civil War. It wanted a clean conscience in its foreign relations. Yet, it doesn't realize or consider the pernicious effects of its external actions. Many of its actions contradict the very principles which govern its internal institutions. What the U.S. wants for itself it doesn't want for others.

I don't mean the U.S. is responsible for all Latin America's problems. Far from it! Our problems go back to the Indian empires, and certainly to Spanish colonialism, to anarchy, dictatorship, colonial structures, and so called republican governments. What is so extraordinary and painful about Latin American - United States relations is that when we attempt to change our position and social structures, we are criticized. The U.S. says: "You Communists! You subversives! You terrorists! Go back to your cage! Stay as you are." This is intolerable. We are blamed because we don't try to overcome backwardness. When we try, we're "subversive" and must be forced back to our previous state.. Its a vicious circle.

Q: What needs to change?

U.S. attitudes?

A: That will be very difficult. They are tremendously short-sighted. They see only their own most immediate

interests. For example, I am familiar with the work to develop international sea treaties. Several years of effort have gone into these difficult negotiations. They are supremely important to the future of humankind. They would establish that third world countries have rights to the sea and its minerals. Last year U.S. mining companies pressured President Reagan, saying that they did not want third world governments to participate in exploiting these resources. The conference was cast aside after several years of effort. It's incredibly shortsighted! A few mining companies pressure the government. The government gives in and destroys a chance for international harmony and justice.

Q: That is historical amnesia.

A: There you have it.

Q: You say that what will change the U.S.'s relationships with Latin America is an understanding of its culture. Do you feel we are close to that?

A: No, far from it. That's an idealistic desire. Realistically, I think that in universities, the press, television, books, and personal contacts, Latin Americans themselves must make their culture understood. We can make it known to North American students, intellectuals, and journalists. We would not say our culture is better, but different. We have different cultural roots. That must be understood in order to have intelligent political

relations. I'm very pessimistic about that right now. These issues do not seem to matter one bit to the Reagan administration. They are following a self-defeating foreign policy of brute force.

Q: Do you think U.S. foreign relations will worsen?

A: They already have. It was a colossal mistake for the U.S. to assign El Salvador an unwanted strategic role in the on-going East-West confrontation. The U.S. has chosen to prove its machismo in El Salvador as it could not in Tehran, Kabul or Warsaw. It's like proving your power by hitting a malnourished 9-year old.

What is happening is terrible. It's difficult for the U.S. to stop the military escalation because intervention requires more intervention, which, in turn, strengthens the opposition of the people of El Salvador. Ironically, U.S. intervention through arms and political acts could achieve what the Farabundo Marti front could not do.

It could unify the opposition in El Salvador.

I was in Havana when the first Soviet tanker arrived. Cuba had no oil. Only when the U.S. broke relations with Cuba and wouldn't sell them oil did Cuba ally itself with the USSR. That doesn't have to repeat itself.

Mexico sells oil to Nicaragua. If a revolutionary government assumed power in El Salvador, Mexico would sell them oil. Mexico and Venezuela have agreed to provide oil to Central America's Caribbean basin, at a

30% credit. So there are proofs of what is possible between third world nations with real solidarity. Nicaragua has not had to do as Cuba did.

We've learned that you can't leave a small South American country alone before the U.S. The U.S. will promptly sacrifice that country up to the U.S.S.R. to show that socialist revolutions inevitably lead to Soviet domination. We must prevent this. Mexico is helping Nicaragua with oil. West Germany is helping financially.

Q: You say revolution and independence are possible in Latin America.

A: Yes.

Q: Without having to choose between the U.S. and . . .

A: Neither the Russians nor the North Americans are interested in their independence. That's made clear by events in El Salvador. If a pure Marxist-Leninist regime came into power in El Salvador, what economic choices would it have? It could perpetuate the intolerable economic dependence on the U.S. or it could depend on the Soviet Union. Dependence on the U.S.S.R. is no longer possible as the Russian economy is now bankrupt. It's a strain for them to invest 3-4 million dollars daily in Cuba. They can't extend that umbilical cord to El Salvador. They lack the resources, and Salvadorans don't want it.

The third choice is true (non-aligned) independence.

A truly independent democratic government, including a

Marxist-Leninist one, could find resources and support from many places. I'm thinking of Mexico and Venezuela, Germany, France, the EEC countries, Japan, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. too. A Latin American revolution, even a socialist one, must take some part in the capitalist world. The U.S., by opposing their participation, is digging its own grave. Teddy Roosevelt's policies are not for today's world.

Q: How can there be peace in the Third World when Third World countries are not united in their stance towards the industrialized countries.

A: That's not true at all. I've had the opportunity of heading part of the Mexican delegation to the North-South conference in Paris, about cooperation between industrialized and developing nations. What we saw remained true through the ensuing years: extraordinary solidarity among Third World countries. Industrialized countries try to say: "How can you be united? You have rich countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Emirates which earn a huge number of petrodollars at the expense of oil importing nations. Yet you are non-OPEC third world countries. You are left behind because you too pay high prices for oil." Although the argument sounds plausible, even the most desperate country of Africa or the Caribbean understood that without the power of the oil exporters, the industrialized nations would not even begin to negotiate on other issues. The tactic of underdeveloped

nations, including Mexico, was to state that negotiations over oil, energy, supplies, prices of raw materials, and Third World debts and problems of economic and social development were inseparable. Saudi Arabia, Zaire, Mexico, Brazil, India... were in perfect agreement about this. We must continue to work out structures for cooperating within the Third World. Only by doing so can we continue to get cooperation from the industrialized countries. The U.S. has no desire to cooperate. But there is progress in Germany, France, England and the EEC, and the Scandinavian countries which give the greatest proportion of their incomes in aid. We have to learn to help each other in the Third World: like Mexico and Venezuela supplying oil on favorable terms to Central America and the Caribbean.

Q: The U.S. has an enormous number of Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants. How does the future look for the U.S.? How will they stop this vast number of immigrants?

A: In the first place immigration never hurt anyone. John Kenneth Galbraith wrote an excellent book called "The Nature of Mass Poverty" published by Harvard University Press. He discusses the immigration from Ireland, Sweden and Germany to the U.S., Canada and Australia in the 1900's. The migration solved problems both for those European countries and the countries of the New World and Oceania where the immigrants went. It solved problems for both sides. The immigrant is usually an enterpris-

ing, dynamic person. He breaks the trap of poverty in his own country and creates riches in the new country. Hispanic immigration to the U.S. has created wealth here. They have come to work to contribute to the needs of the North American market. Otherwise they would not work here. If they did not do the work they do it is possible no one would. That is why they are doing it. We should understand they are not delinquents but workers.

The U.S. presents itself as the country of progress, freedom, and wealth. It advertises this all over the world through radio and television. It creates a giant pole of attraction for countries with problems of unemployment and overpopulation. There is only one way to keep Third World people who want to or should remain in their countries from leaving them. That is the economic, social and political development of those countries. If the U.S. wants to prevent the sudden arrival at its ports of entry of huge waves of people mesmerized by false hopes . . . I mean millions of people within 20 or 25 years . . . the U.S. should participate generously and with foresight in Third World development in the North-South dialogue . . . to resolve those fundamental problems. Then many people who now want to leave their countries because they feel trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty that Galbraith describes would not leave.

Think about those who face bullets, dogs, chains, murder and torture by the police because they want to

enter the U.S., particularly the Mexicans. How can we keep these people out without using force? The Mexican government can't act like a totalitarian or fascist government and say "you can't leave your town" or "you can't go to the border." There would have to be a police state to stop people from travelling. People have a constitutional right to travel within the republic. So the population will spread out. This is a challenge for the U.S. This is historical irony.

In 1836 and 1848 Mexico lost half its territory because it admitted North American immigrants into what is now Texas, California, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. We let them come: Houston, Davy Crockett, Stephen Austin, Dallas . . . names of cities now! They became a slave-holding, protestant 5th column within Mexico. They engineered a coup which triggered a U.S. invasion of Mexico. Now Latin American people are returning to lands which were Mexican and Spanish for over 5 centuries. It's ironic this resettlement is taking place. This kind of immigration has no precedent in U.S. history. The Poles, Russians, Germans and Swedes who came to the U.S. left their land, language and customs across an ocean. The new Latin American immigrants have turned the tables on the United States which took their old homeland. For every 8 undocumented Mexican workers in the U.S., 7 return to Mexico. They maintain ties with their families, land and speech. This creates problems

for the U.S.

The United States, as its name indicates, needs unity and homogeneity . . . not a country with a different language. That's like admitting Portugal or Singapore into the union, or Puerto Rico. It has another language and identity. It has a separate historical profile.

Q: I'd like to ask you about Puerto Rico. Would you comment on the choices of independence, statehood, and commonwealth?

A: My first encounter with Puerto Rico was unusually important to me. I felt I was arriving in a Latin American country. The language, the people I met, the culture and customs, the ideals, the past, memory . . . everything tied us together. I was in a Latin American country, not in the 51st state of the American union. What interests me is the great power of language in Puerto Rico. It is a monolingual society whose literature is part of Spanish literature. It's an important part of us. It has poets like Luis Pales Matos, Hugo Margenat, Julia de Burgos. There are also younger writers: Luis Rafael Sanchez has written a great novel: "La Guarach Macho Camacho." That could only have been written in Spanish and in Puerto Rico. Ideally, I favor independence. I'd like Puerto Rico to be an independent, sovereign Latin American country. How could I not want it?