

Major issues face Latin America in 2007

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The routine of selecting the top ten news stories of the year is done and came out just about as expected.

Beginning with Iraq and running through the Democratic election upheaval, the atomic standoff with North Korea and Iran and immigration, the Associated Press survey also included items such as illegal immigration, the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the ongoing tragedy in Dafur.

Other than acknowledging the failure of the congress to come to terms with the immigration issue, the list again fails to recognize the serious issues at our doorstep in Latin America.

A year from now the list may look quite different—it could include the following stories:

- ✓ A change of leadership in Cuba. The long-awaited end of the Fidel Castro regime is at hand. Most likely by this time next year Castro will either have died or will have permanently turned over rule to his brother Raúl. Already the junior Castro has signaled his desire to open up dialogue with the United States and loosen the country's draconian economic measures. As he provides transition to a younger, less-authoritarian cadre of leadership, the U.S. will have plenty of opportunities to put aside decades of enmity and discover a new working relationship with the island nation.
- ✓ The moderation of leftist tendencies in Latin America. The past year and a half have seen a dozen presidential elections in Latin America that have affirmed a growing independence from U.S. influence throughout the region and a gradual shift to the left. However, being an extreme leftist is not working well for those who have beat the anti-U.S. drums the loudest. While Venezuela's Hugo Chavez easily won reelection, he suffered several set backs primarily in reaction to his inability to control himself on the world stage. His antics at the United Nations ruined his country's chance for a seat on the Security Council and his attempts to influence elections in countries such as Peru and Mexico backfired as voters in those nations rejected Venezuelan interference as much as they reject U.S. interference. And, elected leftists in Ecuador, Nicaragua and even Bolivia are finding that a more moderate course works better at home and is necessary if they are going to count on investments from other countries.

- ✓ The issue of uncontrolled immigration. It is obvious that U.S. citizens want a coherent government policy on immigration, especially the illegal aspects of it. The coming year should see positive developments in this area. A Democratic-controlled congress is much more open to developing both reasonable controls on the influx of Latin Americans and policies that will speed the way of those here to settle in and become part of the U.S. mixing bowl. Discovering a policy to regulate and regularize immigration will also go a long way to addressing the issue of Central American gang infiltration, the transport of drugs over our porous border and the threat of terrorists mixing in with those who genuinely seek work here.
- ✓ Trade issues. The big question for next year's list will be those related to free trade and alternative trade alliances. The Democratic congress will be more isolationist than its Republican predecessor and less likely to readily approve trade agreements that don't consider environmental and labor issues and protection for U.S. businesses. At the same time, it will have to consider whether the U.S. is willing to allow China and other Asian countries to surpass our level of economic trade with our southern neighbors and to build increasing influence in our own backyard.

Each of these rapid changes offers the United States a wealth of opportunities to improve our neglected political and economic relationships with our nearest neighbors. It will take, however, a willingness to pay more attention to Latin Americans and their issues and to put aside decades of adversarial relationships with nations such as Cuba or others with "leftist" inclinations while opening doors to dialogue and cooperation.

Kenneth D. MacHarg is a resident of Carrollton, GA and the author of a forthcoming book on challenges and opportunities that the United States faces in Latin America

Major issues face Latin America in 2007, Dec 29, 2006